Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon? 1

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA

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VOLUME 1

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YEN ON
NEW YORK

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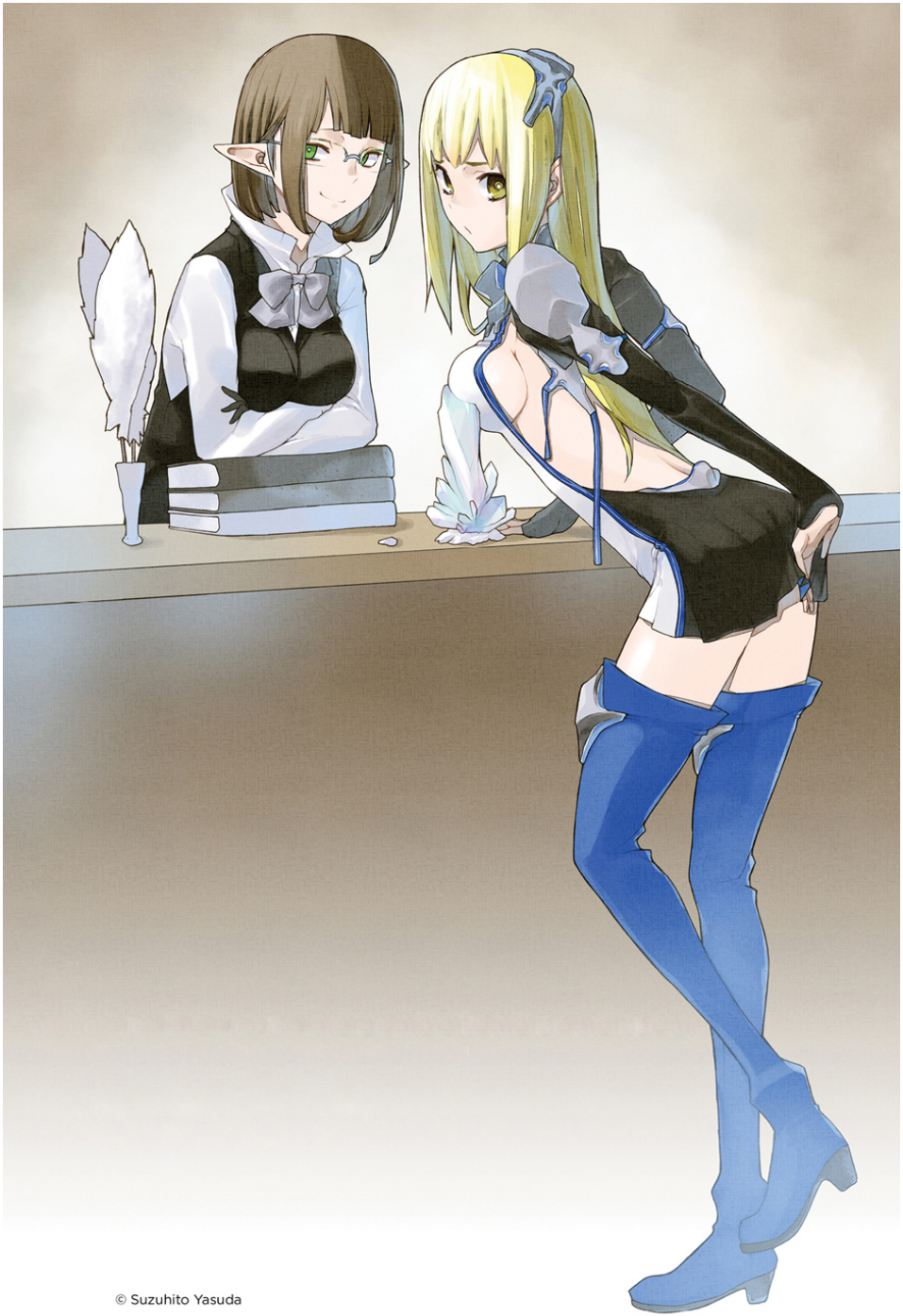
Loki
Freya
Hestia
Hephaistos



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Prologue
IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?

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Prologue

IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?

Is it wrong to try to pick up girls in a dungeon?

You know, an endless labyrinth divided into multiple floors and filled with scary monsters?

Expectation:

Join a group of fearless adventurers seeking wealth and fame. Go off to battle as soon as guild registration is complete.

Meet a beautiful girl and protect her from an onslaught of monsters with only a sword in my hand.

The air fills with her echoing screams, the monsters' roars, and the clash of my sword as we face certain death.

In the end, all that remains is her sitting on the floor beside my cool, heroic self standing over the remains of all the monsters I slew.

Her cheeks blush as she looks upon me with beautiful, sparkling eyes. Love is about to bloom.

Then sometimes I'd go to the local watering hole to boast about my day's adventures to the cute barmaids, make some new allies.

Sometimes I'd protect a young elfess from a few of my more barbaric comrades.

Sometimes I'd help a struggling Amazonian warrior by letting her join my party.

Sometimes I might be seen getting friendly with other girls, causing some drama and jealousy.

Sometimes this, sometimes that, sometimes…

I want to grow up a bit, become the kind of hero men dream about in tales of adventure.

I want to be more than friends with cute girls.

I want to meet the ladies of all the different races.

Isn't having these slightly corrupt and naïve thoughts part of being a young man?

Is trying to meet girls in a dungeon, no… a harem, really that wrong?

Conclusion:

I was wrong.

“Urrrrooooooarrrrrrr!!!!”

“Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeee?!!”

I’m about to die courtesy of these slightly corrupt and naïve thoughts.

Basically, I’m being chased by the bull-headed man-beast, the Minotaur.

I’m going to be devoured by a monster that my measly Level One attacks can’t even scratch.

I’m dead. So, so dead.

Where did my dumb, despicable delusions get me? To the Minotaur’s dinner plate, that’s where. I’m such an idiot…

I was stupid to think I was destined to find my dream girl in a dungeon.

Striking gold in here—the golden locks of a beautiful maiden, that is—was nothing more than a hopeless fantasy.

Come to think of it, I was doomed the moment I decided to look for my dream girl in a dungeon where hundreds of adventurers die every day.

Ahh, what would I give to go back in time? To go back to that moment when I came of age and registered at the guild, eyes sparkling, and punch myself in the face. That would be so nice…

But that’s not possible, physically or otherwise.

“Uughunnnnn!”

“Daaahhh!”

The Minotaur’s hoof comes crashing down behind me.

Ha-ha! It missed! Eh? When did that crack get there?

Not the most graceful face-plant… Here comes that hoof again! Roll! Now!

“Hoo-hooo…!”

“Waaahhhhhhhh!!!!”

All I can do now is scoot my sorry butt back.

All the cute girls would laugh for sure if they saw me like this. From the start, guess I never had what it takes to be a beloved hero.

My back hits the wall. Now there really is nowhere to run.

I sprinted all that way, hall after hall, just to get trapped in a wide, square room. And now I’m cornered.

This really is the end…I think to myself, my teeth chattering and tears rolling down my cheeks.

The Minotaur’s nose is so close, its putrid breath pounding my skin.

I look up at its ridiculously muscular body. It has to be at least twice my size. What’s worse, it’s gloating over me with a clumsy, broken

smile.

In the end, I didn't meet any girls at all. The same fantasies that got me in this mess are running through my head for the last time. Oh look, the Minotaur's hoof is above my head…

The next moment, a line shoots across the creature's torso.

"Huh??"

"Uoohhhh??"

Sounds like he's just as confused as I am…

The line doesn't stop there. It travels through thick pectoral muscles, across the raised leg, up the thigh, to the shoulders, and finally out the Minotaur's neck.

Now a silver light is shining through…

And so it was that a monster I couldn't scratch was cut into slabs of meat.

"Guu…?? GWWAAAAAAAAAaaaaaa!!!!"

Its dying roar of surprise and pain echoes through the chamber.

The beast's body falls to pieces along the dissection incisions, as if the seams of an overstuffed doll all burst at once. Its dark red "stuffing" sprays out like a fountain.

Time stands still as a tsunami of beast blood washes over me.

"Are you… okay?"

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That's when I see a young girl, no… goddess emerge from behind what's left of the bull monster.

Her thin body is decorated with light blue clothing.

Even in armor, she radiates feminine beauty.

She stands tall, despite her petite frame. Her bulging twins are packed tightly into a breastplate engraved with a silver emblem. The same emblem graces her wrists and blood-soaked saber. She points the glistening blade downward, the blood dripping harmlessly to the floor.

The blond hair hanging down to her waist shines so brightly, I could swear it's made of real gold.

Atop a body that any woman would call delicate perches the face of a sweet, young girl.

She looks down upon me with golden eyes.

… *Ah!*

A female warrior with golden eyes and hair, clad in light blue raiment.

Even a Level One newbie like me knows who's standing there.

There's no mistaking *Loki Familia's* Aiz Wallenstein.

Everyone knows she's achieved the highest rank among human, no… all female races, Level Five.

"Umm… are you sure you're okay?"

No, I'm not okay.

Definitely not okay.

My heart feels like it could explode and fall to pieces any second. That is not "okay."

My cheeks blush as I gaze upon her with sparkling doe eyes. Love is about to bloom… no, love is erupting within me.

My soul is gone, it's hers now.

Is it wrong to try to pick up girls in a dungeon?

After further review:

I was not wrong.

Chapter 1
WORLD, REALITY, AND DESIRE

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Chapter 1

WORLD, REALITY, AND DESIRE

“Miiiiisssssssssssssss Eina!!!!!!!!”

“Hm?”

Eina Tulle, a receptionist for the “guild” that manages all dungeon activities, looked up from the book she held loosely in one hand.

Her long, pointed ears twitched as her transparent emerald eyes tore themselves away from the pages. Her mid-length brown hair shone in the early afternoon sunlight. Despite her good looks, she was not quite as “perfect” as the elves. It was as if her beauty had been glued on, but a corner was sticking up. The guild uniform, black jacket and pants, suited her thin frame very well.

Known as the young Miss Congeniality within the guild, Eina was half human, half elf.

Adventurers were usually out in a dungeon at this time of day, so Eina had decided to read to pass the time. She responded quickly to the voice that had called her name.

He made it back safely again today…

What had it been, two weeks?

Since this bright-eyed kid came in to register with the guild?

It had fallen on her to become this fourteen-year-old’s dungeon adviser and coach.

He was an adventurer, a job that anyone, regardless of age or gender, could secure. But so many people died doing it. He was still a child, and she hated sending him into such a dangerous place.

The only reason she worried for the boy’s, Bell Cranell’s, safety was that he was in her charge. She smiled, happy to hear his voice and relieved that he had returned safely.

She hurried to fix her glasses and straighten her clothes before he came through the door.

“MMMMMIIIISSSSSSSSSS EINA!!!!!!!”

Someone covered in black blood flew into the guild?!?! Is that him?!?!

“EEEEEKKKKKKKKK!!!!!!!”

“Tell me everything you know about Aiz Wallenstein, please!!!!”

“You know, Bell, after getting covered in blood, you should at least take a shower before coming in here…”

“Sorry about that…”

I can only hang my head and listen as she speaks.

We are in a small room set up in the lobby of Guild headquarters. Sitting in chairs across from each other, there’s only a table between us.

I’m clean at this point, but that doesn’t stop her from making an overly dramatic sigh.

“I can’t believe you walked through the city as such a revolting mess! It makes me question your sanity.”

“B… but…”

Hearing someone as pretty as Eina say something that harsh so directly cuts really deep. Tears are welling up in the corners of my eyes.

Eina cracks a painful smile and gently pushes my nose with her finger. “Be careful next time, okay?” she asks, giving me a big smile. I nod up and down as fast as I can.

“So, you wanted information on Aiz Wallenstein, yes? Can I ask why?”

“Well, about that…”

I tell her everything about what had just happened, my face getting redder with every word.

I start with how I decided to go from the lower second floor of the dungeon, my usual route, down to the lower fifth.

And then about how I encountered a Minotaur the moment I arrived.

Even about trying to run away and getting cornered.

Then being saved from certain death by the “kenki,” Aiz Wallenstein.

Finally, I tell her how I tried to say “thank you” and reach up to shake her hand, but my whole body was shaking. I suddenly got shy and really nervous. All the blood drained from my face in the blink of an eye. In the end, I ran back to headquarters at full speed.

Eina is nice enough to lend me her ears, but her face gets more and more frightening with each passing detail.

“Aaahh, why don’t you ever listen to me?!? You are alone, *solo*, in the Dungeon! You can’t just suddenly go that deep without any preparation! How many times have I told you that adventurers shouldn’t go on adventures?!?”

“Y-yes ma’am…”

—Adventurers shouldn’t go on adventures—

That’s Eina’s motto. It may sound like one heck of a contradiction, but she’s really saying, “Get some insurance and safety first.”

Seems like newbies like me really need to take her words to heart. I

heard most adventurers who die in the dungeon are newbies, too.

No one could have guessed that an encounter with a category Level Two monster like the Minotaur would have happened on the lower fifth floor of the Dungeon.

Everyone knows that Minotaurs only show up on the lower fifteenth floor or lower. I can hear Eina's words now: "No telling what will happen in a dungeon."

But seriously, if it weren't for that girl, I'd be dead right about now. Just thinking about it sends shivers down my spine and almost makes me piss myself.

I swear on my soul that I'll never forget another word out of Eina's mouth.

"Sounds to me like you've got some weird fantasy about dungeons, and that was the reason for today's events. Am I right?"

"Ha-ha, ha-ha-haaaaaa…"

Yep, she was right. But if I admitted that I went on an adventure to meet girls, she'd clobber me right here.

It's true, the main reason that I wanted to become an adventurer in the first place was the not-so-pure goal of meeting as many pretty girls and beautiful ladies as I could, just like the heroes in tales of adventure. Eina probably saw it written all over my face when I registered for the Guild. Even though she doesn't try to control me, she always looks at me like I'm up to something.

But from today on, I'm turning over a new leaf. All of those dirty daydreams are out the window. From today, I'll be going into the dungeons with a purer purpose.

All because I met that girl.

"Um, if it's okay… Could you tell me about Ms. Wallenstein now?"

"Well, it's against Guild regulations to give out adventurers' personal information…"

She paused for a moment before saying, "All I can tell you is information that is already out there?" She might just be helping me out because I'm a newbie, but Eina's kindness is amazing.

Full Name: Aiz Wallenstein. She is the female warrior at the core of *Loki Familia*.

There is no question that her swordsmanship is on par with the strongest of all adventurers. She once wiped out a horde of Level Five monsters by herself, earning her the nickname "kenki," or sword princess. Some go as far as to call her "senki," which sounds like "Lady of Combat."

I heard that the gods call her Aiz "maji musou," or "Aiz the Unequaled."

Males who try to put the moves on her are slain, utterly destroyed.

She just recently passed the thousand-kill mark.

"Let's see, what else… With her amazing body and strength like that,

there are plenty of things to talk about."

"Um… Not as an adventurer. What does she do in her free time? What food does she like? Maybe you could tell me more about the last thing you said there…"

Eina blinks her eyes two, three times. I think my face is on fire.

"What's this? Bell, do you have a thing for Ms. Wallenstein?"

"No, nah… well, kinda… yes…"

"Hee-hee, I don't blame you, though. I'm female, same as her, but my heart skips a beat when I see her."

Eina lets out a small chuckle as she brings a cup of tea to her lips. How can she be that elegant just drinking tea?

It's not just Eina who looks up to Aiz Wallenstein; she's popular with other adventurers, too. Eyes like jewels framed with soft skin, a delicate chin, a pretty nose. She is the living, breathing definition of beauty. There are rumors about how many men are after her heart, but no one knows for sure. Eina is my boss! And we are talking like this! Am I a lucky guy or what?

Despite being half human, Eina has all of the refined beauty of a full-blooded elf. I can't believe how friendly and open she is with me. She tells me many people judge her on her looks and don't know her real personality.

Eina looks a little down after saying that but tells me that she's never heard of anyone dating Ms. Wallenstein.

Fist pump! Hell yeah!

"I really don't know about her hobbies or anything like that… Wait, wait, wait! This is a workplace! These questions have nothing to do with your job! I'm not a matchmaker!"

"But you could try?"

"N-O. Unless you have something else to discuss about your job, go home already!"

She stands up and almost chases me out of the room. It was pointless to try and stay any longer. She follows me out into the Guild lobby.

The lobby is a little bit underwhelming even though it's made of white marble. But all the pictures of famous adventurers and various gods on the walls give me a sense of being part of something big.

"Ahh, you're such a tease, Miss Eina…"

"You know, you are an adventurer. There are plenty of other things that you should be thinking about, right?"

"Yeaaahhh."

Yes, I know.

The only option for people without someone to support and protect them, like me, is to work hard in the dungeons to make enough money to see tomorrow. Also, if I don't know my contract inside and out, I'm up the creek without a paddle. Money is always tight.

Plus there is someone… no, a goddess, who I need to support. I don't

have time to get caught up in my feelings for Ms. Wallenstein.

"You already have a 'blessing' from a god other than Loki, right? To be in a relationship with someone in a different *Familia* would be difficult, to say the least."

"… Yeah?"

"I don't want to say give up, but you have to face facts. Otherwise, this will only be a problem for you."

Focus on being an adventurer for now; that has to be what she's trying to say.

But seriously, it felt like a death sentence when she brought up the *Familia*.

Eina must have noticed the will to live draining from my face and decided to try and get my mind off of it by getting back to business.

"Are you going to get some money?"

"… Well, yeah. I slew a few monsters before meeting the Minotaur, so that's something."

"Then let's go to the Exchange. I'll walk you there."

Now I feel bad because she's going out of her way. Sure, left and right don't seem all that different to me right now, but she's already done so much.

I still feel okay talking to her, but there is no way I'll be able to look her in the eyes after today.

The Exchange is within headquarters itself. We go there, and I pick up my pay for today.

I trade in some magic stone shards I got for killing mostly goblins and kobolds. Everything comes out to about 1,200 vals worth of money. Less than usual, but considering I ran away from Ms. Wallenstein, I didn't spend as much time as I usually do in the Dungeon.

Let's see… Weapon repairs, food for me and the goddess… No new items for me today…

"Bell?"

"Oh… yes? What is it?"

Eina had walked with me almost out the door, but she stopped just before leaving headquarters.

She looks like she has something on her mind, and then just says it:

"Girls like men who are strong and can be relied on. So if you work hard, get stronger, then maybe, possibly… You know?"

"……"

"Maybe if you make a name for yourself, Ms. Wallenstein might notice you?"

I stop and chew over those words for a moment. Did Eina, the boss who is always looking down on me, just say that? She's trying to cheer me on as another person, not a superior. Oh yeah, that's a smile growing on my face.

Energy and hope flood in as I step out onto the street. Just because I

feel like it, I turn on my heel and yell back at her:

"Miss Eina! I love you!!!!!!!"

"… What?"

"Thank you!!!!"

Eina's bright-red face makes me laugh as I set out into the busy streets of the city.

The Labyrinth City, Orario.

There is a labyrinth known as the Dungeon beneath the city. It might be better to say that the massive city was built on top of it.

The Guild oversees everyone who goes below the surface at the core of the city. It's not just humans, either; there are many kinds of demi-humans living in this flourishing metropolis alongside us.

That's about all I know about Orario. Books and studying have never really been my thing. I know that much about the city because I live here.

People who make a living in the Dungeon are all called "adventurers," like me.

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I grew up in a small town not far from here. Looking back, I was a really sheltered kid. My grandfather brought me up, but he died about a year ago. There was nothing left for me there, so I packed up what money was left and moved to the city.

I don't think I have to say it at this point, but I came to Orario to meet girls in the Dungeon.

"—Real men try to make a harem!"

How many times did Gramps say that? I can still remember his smile, so full of life.

Gramps read tales of adventure to me for as long as I can remember. I loved the heroes of those stories. They slew the monsters, saved people from certain death, rescued the princess from anything, and looked awesome while doing it. Every time I heard Gramps tell me those stories, I saw myself as the hero. My head was filled with dreams of being one of them.

Gramps let me in on the best part about being the hero.

"The hero's greatest taste of glory is not from slaying the monsters; it's meeting the girls."

It didn't take long for visions of cute girls by my side after a dangerous adventure to saturate my brain. Gramps taught me about being "a man's man." I was well on my way.

As I got older, part of me accepted the fact that I would never become the hero from the tales, but on the other hand, Gramps built me up so much that the girls became my new goal.

The book that he swore by, his bible if you will, was *Dungeon Oratoria*. It's filled with stories about various heroes and their adventures. I think I bought into his enthusiasm.

If I can be in a place where heroes' stories are made… If I can get to Orario… If I can get into the Dungeon…

If I could just do that, then the girl of my dreams would show up any day.

Gramps passed on, but the determination he left behind pushed me out the door, all the way to Orario and the Dungeon.

I admit that I was winging it when I first got here. But now, after a brush with death, I feel really stupid for going into the Dungeon just for the ladies. I'm probably the only idiot who went in like that. Well, I'm pretty sure that the adventurers seeking money and fame are basically the same as me, maybe.

Today made me realize just living is hard.

I will never take the Dungeon lightly again.

But now I have completely different reasons for going into the Dungeon—including Ms. Wallenstein.

I slip into the multiracial crowd on Main Street.

Dwarves, gnomes, animal people, prums… Some look like normal townsfolk, and some look a lot more dangerous. A human country boy like me is so out of place here. Even in this crowd, everything looks so new and interesting. The constant noise of the city is so invigorating, even though others complain it's too loud. I'll never get tired of this city!

I work my way through the crowd, catching a few glimpses of some really cute and dignified elves along the way.

There's the street I'm looking for. I make my way out of the crowd, off of Main Street, and into a smaller back road. There are so many twists and turns back here I'm surprised I don't get lost more often.

As the noise of Main Street fades, I arrive at a dead end.

"……"

I crane my neck back to look up at an old, rundown church in this cul-de-sac. I don't think anyone has been here in years.

To think, this two-story building was built to be a place to worship the gods. Now it's not much more than ruin. There are pieces of walls missing. Well, actually, they're in piles on the ground where they fell. There's a hint of sadness about this place, left over from the people who stopped coming here who knows how many years ago.

A statue of a goddess smiles down on me from above the main door of the church. She's seen better days. Half of her face is missing, and chunks of rock from her body are gone. I've seen more complete Swiss cheese.

"Yo!"

There really was no need to check, but I wanted to make sure I was alone before going into the church. There are no doors in the main entrance, not much for security. Then again, the inside isn't much better than the outside.

In fact, the inside looks half destroyed. As I step inside, my foot lands on a weed growing out of the broken tile floor. Pieces of the ceiling are either gone or about to fall. On the bright side, this lets in a bit of sunlight. The sunbeams light up what's left of an altar at the back of the church.

I weave through the wreckage on my usual path, heading toward a small room behind the altar. It was once a storage room and is still lined with empty shelves. But the shelf at the very back corner is actually a door to a stairwell. I pull it back and climb down.

The stairway isn't that long, and there's still some light sneaking in from outside. I had no trouble opening the door.

"Goddess! I'm home!"

As my voice echoes off the basement walls, the smell of home wafts into my nose. The room is small, but big enough to live in comfortably.

The person I called is sprawled out on a purple sofa just inside the door. She looks up from her book and jumps to her feet.

Just by looking at her, you would probably think she was a young

girl about to hit puberty. Being that she is just a little bit shorter than me, many people would mistake us for brother and sister only a year or so apart.

Her feet thump quickly on the floor as she runs up to me with a big smile on her kiddie face.

"Hey, hey, welcome back! Aren't you a bit early?"

"Well, I almost died in the Dungeon today…"

"What, what? You okay? It'd be a real shock to me if you died. I'd be lonely and possibly really sad, too."

Her tiny hands dance up and down my body, looking for injuries.

I can't help but blush a little. Her kind tone and words always cheer me up.

"Don't worry. I won't leave my goddess high and dry."

"Oh? I'm glad you've made up your mind because I need a lot of water."

"That's an interesting way to put it…"

Both of us crack smiles and walk into the back of the room.

The space we share has one square part and one long part; it's the shape of a *P* underground. The entrance is in the square, the door in the middle of the front wall, and two sofas face each other against the other two opposite walls. We sit down on our own sofas.

The girl sitting across from me is, without a doubt, pretty. Her shiny jet-black hair falls down on the sides of her head to cover her ears but is also long enough to be tied into two extensive ponytails that reach down to her waist. Two ribbons with silver bells hold them together. Her round face and cheeks make her look very young, which is why I can't believe how much her boobs push up her clothes. I try not to look, honest! It's hard not to…

Add in her clear blue, orb-like eyes, and she has an aura like a fairy-tale character come to life.

Although by usual standards she would become an absolute bombshell in a few years, I don't think her appearance will ever change that much.

She is, after all, a goddess. I call her that for a reason.

She's different from us humans, demi-humans, or the monsters that appear in the Dungeon. She came from another plane, Deusdia. She won't age or change much at all like we do. Far above humans, she's even more influential than any of the heroes I idolized back in the day.

"I bet you didn't get much money at all today, did you?"

"No, not as much as usual. How about you, Goddess?"

"Hee-hee! Take a look at this! Ta-da!"

"Th-those are?!"

"Yep! I did so well at the shop today that I got these potato snacks for free! Party night!! Bell, I won't let you sleep tonight, at all."

"Wow! Great job, Goddess!"

This influential goddess is working part-time at a human-owned shop in Orario. If she didn't, of course, we wouldn't be able to survive.

A long time ago, gods and goddesses came down to our world. They call it Gekai, or "lower world." There are many myths and legends that explain the why and how, but according to the goddess I know, the gods were just bored up there.

They were in their upper world, Tenkai, not doing much at all for eternity. The gods had all the time in the world but nothing to do. Then they started watching us waste so much, but also make so many interesting things like culture and business. The "children"—us, basically—became the best entertainment available.

"We shall be among the children as they are, with the same abilities. They shall see us."

They may be perfect beings, yet they have their flaws. They would have to, because they were interested enough in our world to come here.

The excitement of a new world with the children lured many gods to Gekai. They wanted to experience things like phenomena they couldn't foresee, a desire for food, hobbies, fine arts, and the indefinable bonds of friendship like the children had every day.

They laughed, or so I've been told.

The gods and goddesses feel like they are playing a game and are fully enjoying it because it is impossible to predict what will happen.

It wasn't long before gods were living in Gekai. Quite a few of them decided to live here permanently.

As for our ancestors who lived here first, they didn't reject the gods when they arrived. Why would they? They revered the gods because they could receive blessings. To put it another way: you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours. That relationship is still clearly going on today.

They live among us now. We live and work side by side, helping one another out.

These gods abandoned their separate and constrained lifestyles to live in our inconvenient world.

"A ton of people walk around the city looking like mascots. They're cute and all, but I can never find one I'd want in my *Familia*. The good ones all go after the money! If only more people knew the name Hestia…"

"I'm not so sure. All the 'blessings' start out the same, no matter what god or goddess gave it…"

I live with the goddess Hestia. I guess gods and goddesses have names just like us.

A *Familia* is basically a group formed by a god. For example, *Loki Familia* is the group put together by the goddess Loki, and *Hestia Familia* by Hestia. Some people call it Team Loki or Team Hestia.

Personally, I think that being in a *Familia* is like being part of that god's family.

While gods are in Gekai, they can't use their godly powers, called Arkanam. It's a rule that they set themselves shortly after arriving. Without Arkanam, they need our food and money to survive.

While I have heard of a few gods who like working, most gods came here to have fun. So, they rely on us "children" to make money for them while they do whatever.

A person gets a "blessing" when they join a *Familia*.

In exchange, they use the power from the blessing to make money.

To be frank, members of a *Familia* provide for their god.

But we can't argue with the benefits of receiving a blessing. Anyone with a blessing can get strong enough to take down even the fiercest monsters.

Hestia, the goddess sitting across from me, calls it "give and take."

"Bell, I really feel bad making you work by yourself to provide for me."

"Hey, I'm fine. And you're working, too, aren't you?"

Some *Familias* are very large with hundreds of members, and some are very small, like ours.

In these circumstances, even the gods or goddesses themselves must find work… like Hestia. They can't do what they love; they have to make money first.

Sure, they can do anything they want to earn money. But it makes me happy knowing that the gods living in our society have the same problems I do. I feel, I don't know, closer to them somehow.

Well, there are some gods who turn their *Familia* into a monarchy with themselves at the top. They call it "Kingdom Game" or something like that.

But even that is built and managed by people. Therefore, the gods have to follow our rules. There are some who say the gods are manipulating our society by behaving this way, but the fact that a god was able to create a "kingdom" is only because a group of people wanted him to.

While the gods do watch over what we create, in the end, they have no way to give anyone an advantage over the competition.

"… I'm sorry I made you join the *Familia* of such a pitiful god…"

"G-Goddess…"

I watch her withdraw into the sofa. My voice sounded pathetic even to my own ears.

I met Hestia while circling Orario trying to join a *Familia*. I had just arrived, and I needed a blessing before I could become an adventurer.

The famous *Familias* always have people trying to join their already full ranks. So people with skills that would benefit the group get first priority. Country-boy newbies like me get passed over. I wasn't just shown the door, I had it slammed in my face a few times.

I think that Hestia could see that in my eyes when we crossed paths. Sort of like I was a lost puppy, and she brought me home.

Hestia came to Gekai relatively recently and was staying with a friend, also a goddess, and her *Familia* before she met me. She told me that she spent all day every day doing what she loved, reading our books. Her friend eventually got angry and kicked her out. But she wasn't heartless; Hestia's friend found this room under the church for her.

But really, all blessings are equal. That's a fact.

Everyone who receives a blessing starts from the same point. As for how they grow, well, that depends completely on them.

In the end, *Familias* are judged by the abilities of their members, just like any shop or any country. A *Familia* is not strong because of its god, and neither is it weak.

"It's okay, Goddess! Our *Familia* just got started. Better yet, it's on the rise! Sure, it might be difficult now, but as soon as we get past this first part, we'll be sitting pretty! Once we get some money saved up, people will be lining up to join us!

"Bell… You are just so…!"

Shoosh. She's on her feet. Her eyes fill with hope and happiness as she gazes at me. But everything I just said, word for word, came from Eina, not me. That hurts a bit, right in the conscience.

But my goddess is happy. That's all that matters.

She's the one who took me, a country boy dreaming about a harem and whatnot who almost got crushed because of it, by the hand and encouraged me. She is very important to me.

I want to help her any way I can.

That was the first promise I ever made to myself. I wanted to help her when we first met, and that's not about to change.

"I was so lucky to meet someone like you! Now, for our future, let's update your status!"

"Please!"

The goddess kicks her legs as she jumps up off the sofa. Her impossibly large boobs jiggle as she moves. I saw the bounce, yes, but I looked away. And now I'm smiling again, too. I really have to try harder to keep my eyes off her chest.

Other gods called her "Loli Big Boobs," making fun of her otherworldly bust. But what the heck does "Loli" mean?

"Alrighty, off with the shirt and into bed like usual!"

"Okay."

I walk toward the bed as I unhook my light adventurer's armor and

pull off my undershirt. I look over my shoulder into the full-length mirror at the end of the room.

My topless, pale-skinned reflection with hair as white as Gramps's looks back at me. What really stands out is a clump of black markings on the small of my back.

All of them were engraved into my skin by Hestia. She said it's called "Falna," and it's the mark of a blessing from a god or goddess.

"Lie down, lie down."

I do as I'm told and crawl onto the bed.

As soon as my stomach hits the sheets, the goddess jumps on top of me and uses my butt as her own personal chair.

"You said earlier that you almost died today. What happened?"

"It's a long story, but…"

She rubs my back as I talk. Going over the same spot once, twice, many times, she relaxes my skin.

Ping… The goddess pulls out a long needle.

I look over my shoulder in time to see her prick her own finger with it. A drop of her blood falls onto my back.

The red drop literally sends waves through my body as it sinks in.

"You went into the deeper levels of the Dungeon… to meet girls? What strange fantasies are going through your head? There's no way the ideal virgin you have in mind is going to be in such a dangerous place, now is there?"

"V-virgin??? B-but anyway, it's not like that's what I want! I have morals! Did you know that an elf won't even touch someone who doesn't meet their standards?"

"No need to get worked up. Yes, I know about the elves. But there are also groups like the Amazons. They want to have strong children so badly that women give themselves to men just because of their strength. I think you're going to wear yourself out, that's all."

"… Oh."

She looks down at me with an all-knowing glance after bringing that up. Meanwhile, she's kneading the spot on my back where the blood had landed, working down slowly from the left. She changes the markings.

These markings on my back are my status, my Falna.

A person's abilities rise when a god's blood is used to write hieroglyphs on their body. Only gods have this power.

There is also a thing called "excelia." Simply put, excelia is experience.

Of course, it isn't something that can be seen or used by "children" in any way. But it tells what path an individual has walked up to that point. Gods can read a person's history in excelia. They will know if by some miracle you slew a monster, for example. Excelia also fuels a person's growth through a blessing.

Everything you have accomplished, both the quality and amount,

shows up in excelia.

The gods can see what you have done, your life story. Kind of like a big sign that says, "Has completed such difficult feats as: slaying a monster, etc." Seems like something the ancients would do, if you ask me.

Gods update the hieroglyphs on their *Familia*'s members' backs to match that person's excelia. To put it another way: level up!

Gods and goddesses use this power to make their "children" stronger.

"And anyway, Aiz Wallenstein, was it? If she really is that pretty and insanely powerful, other men won't leave her alone. She's bound to have a few favorites by now."

"Do you really think so…?"

"Yep. Listen up, Bell. This is a crush; you'll get over it. You should move on and focus more on the girls around you. I am a hundred percent sure that there is a beautiful lady who will accept, hold, and support you in your life right now."

Great, now I'm tearing up again. I don't want to think about it. And she's bashing Ms. Wallenstein. Why is she in such a bad mood? Did I step on a mine or something?

She keeps saying "someone closer to you," but there aren't any women other than her and Eina in my life right now. Eina is my boss. Like hell she'd be interested in me. And then the goddess… Yeah, right. We've known each other for two weeks! And she's a *goddess*.

Goddess, life is not that easy. Eina told me that, too.

"Besides, the girl Ms. Wallensomething is in *Loki Familia*. You couldn't marry her anyway."

"……"

The final blow, right through the heart.

People almost always marry someone of the opposite gender who's either in the same *Familia* or not in one at all. If two people from different *Familias* marry, which group do the kids belong to?

There are other reasons, too, but the important thing is that so many issues get in the way that people avoid inter-*Familia* relationships. Then there are the gods themselves. They may have come here for entertainment, but they take their *Familias* very seriously.

Also, not all of the gods are friends. If two of them are fighting, members of their *Familias* are instantly enemies. Members of each *Familia* don't want to put their allies in danger.

Eina said it first. It would be difficult for me, the only member of *Hestia Familia*, to have a relationship with Ms. Wallenstein, a member of *Loki Familia*.

"All done! And just forget about that girl and keep your eyes open. You will find someone as long as you keep looking closer to home!"

"You're cruel, Goddess…"

No, I'm not giving up. I can't give up without even trying!

We just met. There's no telling what will happen.

I get out of the bed and pull on some normal clothes while trying to rebuild my confidence. The goddess reaches for a piece of paper to write down my new status. I can't read the hieroglyphs myself; no one can. So the gods learned a bit of our written language to help us out.

Even if I could read their hieroglyphs, they're on my back. Who could read something written there?

"Here, your new status."

I take the paper from her lightly outstretched hand.

Bell Cranell
Level One
Strength: I-77 → I-82 Defense: I-13 Utility: I-93 → I-96
Agility: H-148 → H-172 Magic: I-0
Magic
( )
Skills
( )

This is the Falna on my back, my status.

There are five basic abilities: strength, defense, utility, agility, and magic. Each ability has one of ten ranks—S, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I—within each level. S is the strongest.

And *I* is the weakest… The number next to the rank shows our exact ability level: 0 to 99 is the *I* range, 100 to 199 is *H*, and so on. 999 is the absolute maximum. It gets harder to get points as we get stronger, or so I am told.

Level is the most important statistic in a status. Every one of the basic abilities gets a major boost when the level goes up. It wouldn't be that much of a stretch to say a person evolves when they level up. There is a huge difference between Level One and Level Two.

Level Two is much, *much* stronger.

The goddess calls it ranking up.

Let's see… My "Strength," "Utility," and "Agility" went up this time… Wait a sec, what's up with my "Agility"?! I went from H-148 to H-172! Up 24 points from yesterday?!

It must be because I got chased around for who knows how long by the Minotaur.

The excelia system is pretty simple. A person gains experience when they use a basic skill. For example, to gain Defense, I would have to actually get hit by a monster in battle. But all I do is run and dodge, so my Defense almost never goes up.

Eina told me that armor and some weapons raise Defense just by equipping them, but I just run away, so what's the point? Damn, this is embarrassing.

"Um, Goddess? When do you think I'll be able to use magic?"

“Even I don’t know that. I hear people who can use magic have high intelligence in their excelia… You don’t read much, though, do you, Bell?”

“No…”

Magic has to be the first thing people look forward to when they get a blessing.

Before the gods came to Gekai, only a few races could use very limited magic. But now that the gods give out blessings, anyone can learn to use it as long as they’re in a *Familia*.

A person can use up to three different kinds of magic. But knowing only one magic is pretty common. I’ve been told that adventurers who know two kinds of magic become anchors of their team.

Magic is that important. There’s a legend that long ago, an elf used wind magic to slice and dice one hundred humans. Magic is the ultimate trump card that can turn the tables in any situation.

Who could defeat someone who can cast “Sea of Flames” with only a sword? I know I can’t.

There is only one magic slot in my status. I guess that means I can only learn one… eh?

“Goddess, there seems to be something in my Skill slot. It looks like something was erased…”

“Hmm… Oh! Some ink got on my hand, and it got smudged. It’s still open like normal, don’t worry.”

“Just my luck…”

I won’t lie; I got my hopes up a bit.

Skills are completely separate from basic abilities. When activated, they either have an effect on battle or on the user’s body itself. If the status shows improvement in ability, then skills are like a beneficial chemical reaction that tacks on something extra.

Skills may not be as flashy as magic, but they don’t cost as much to use… Though they do cost something…

I glance over my updated status one last time and look up at the clock on the wall. Then I turn to the goddess.

“Goddess, it’s already evening. Shall I get dinner ready? I know we’re going to have a potato snack party, but that won’t be enough to fill us up, right?”

“Sure, I’ll leave it to you, Bell.”

“Right-o.”

I turn from the goddess’s cute smile and go to the kitchen. I can only cook really easy stuff, but yeah. Eina told me I need to think more about money. I’ll start focusing on that. I should try to save as much as possible from now on.

I can feel the goddess staring at my back, but I have some ideas on how to rework my contract. Maybe I can get more money that way!

Hestia gave Bell a send-off to the kitchen as if she were seeing him off to war. Once he was there, she let out a quiet but heavy sigh.

She picked up his status sheet from the bed and compared it to the one written on his back.

Children change so fast… Completely different from us.

Even the slightest thing could change them and spread quickly.

It wasn't desire or culture that defined the people of Gekai. Change did.

I hate this! He changed because of her, and it isn't fair! I won't accept it!

She held her head between her hands, scratching back and forth.

Damn it!

She took another look at Bell's back.

Specifically, she looked at his Skill slot.

Bell Cranell

Level One

Strength: I-77 → I-82 Defense: I-13 Utility: I-93 → I-96
Agility H-148 → H-172 Magic: I-0

Magic
( )
Skills
Realis Phrase
Rapid Growth
Continued desire results in continued growth
Stronger desire results in stronger growth

It was she who had found promising excelia and written that skill into him with her own hands. She regretted it more than anything.

Chapter 2
THAT'S WHY I RUN

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Chapter 2

THAT'S WHY I RUN

"…. nn."

Hestia Familia's base, the hidden room under an old church.

The room is underground, so naturally there are no morning sunbeams or crowing roosters to wake me up. It's just force of habit to get up at a certain time.

I used to have to get up early to work in the fields back home in the countryside. I developed a very precise body clock right around my tummy.

… *Five AM sharp.*

Just to be sure, I lift my head to check the clock on the wall.

While it's dim in here, it's not completely dark thanks to a magic stone lamp on the ceiling. My eyes don't even have to adjust.

Human engineers figured out how to make magic stone lamps. The gods call it "cutting-edge technology." It was the discovery of the century. Even the gods acknowledged the influence of human engineering techniques. These things are amazing!

The goddess and I had a small party last night. When we got sleepy, I left the bed to her and went to sleep on the sofa as usual. Sure, it's not that wide, but I'm used to it.

I blink a few times to get the sleep out of my eyes. I should get up and wash my face and get ready to…. Huh?

There's something on top of me. Not the sheets, and it's round and extremely light. I'm breathing just fine, otherwise I would have noticed sooner.

Just what is this thing? Maybe if I touched it… No way! It's the goddess!

She's asleep with her face buried in my chest. Ha-ha, imagine that.

Did she sleepwalk…?

I guess there's a first time for everything, but now I have to figure out how to get out of this predicament.

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I'm sure I could get out from under her without waking her up, but she's so soft and cuddly, I don't want to move. She's an extremely good body pillow, a godlike one!

There are *Familias* that specialize in making items and weapons, but I can say for sure that they don't have anything like this! The goddess is incredible!

With all due respect to her, I wrap my arms around her squishy body. If cotton were a liquid, this is how it would feel.

This is bad. I really won't be able to get up at this rate.

She even smells nice… Aww, a tiny yawn and now she's snuggling her face into my chest like a little baby.

She's so damn cute!!!

Wait a second, what are these soft melons on my chest? Don't tell me, it's *them*?

I move fast. This god pillow has turned into a death trap. I slide out a little and flip her onto the sofa, trading places with her.

She almost killed me…!

It's the first time she's sent a chill down my spine…

They were touching me! I couldn't breathe! What if I didn't get out of there?

I put the sheet over her and get ready to go. I shouldn't be here when she wakes up. Now that I think about it, wow, I'm an idiot! What have I done?! She's a goddess! And I felt her… on me…

I sneak through the room and out the door without a sound.

"… zzz… Bell, you're so stupid… zzzz…"

Well, that was an eventful way to wake up…

I sigh to myself as the brisk morning air chills my skin.

Main Street in the morning is very different from how it is in the afternoon. The streets feel so much wider at sunrise—no people, no noise. Every one of the two-story shops have their shutters closed. The shops look like a long stone wall all lined up in a row.

The eastern sky is getting brighter. I'm not alone on the streets, either. A few prums are setting up their store here, and a group of dwarves are talking in a cluster over there. By the looks of them, they're adventurers like me. I wonder if I'll run into them in the Dungeon later on.

I might have a lot in common with them. I got up, got ready to prowl the Dungeon, escaped from… I mean, left my goddess behind, and am now on Main Street.

"Ah, rats… I didn't eat anything…"

Grroooowlll. My stomach is talking to me. All I can do is trudge toward the Dungeon and rub my tummy to calm it down.

There is nothing in there, just hunger.

At this rate, I won't be able to slay anything in the Dungeon. Can't concentrate…

I know that I said I wanted to save money yesterday, but if I don't get something to eat, I'll starve before I even get there. What's open at this time? Maybe I can find a nice morsel…

"…?!"

Something's behind me!

Behind my right shoulder!

Nothing…? I'm not the kind of adventurer who can sense danger or anything, but I swear I felt the eyes of a killer on my back… Something *saw* me.

Were they sizing me up? Whoever this is, they're not normal, and they aren't holding anything back.

There's someone on the café terrace setting up tables, two animal people standing on that corner over there, and a woman looking down from the roof of that shop… My eyes are jumping back and forth to all the people I can find. Maybe I missed someone over my other shoulder?

Everything looks normal for early morning on Main Street. There isn't even a suspicious shadow around. Then again, I probably look pretty suspicious, standing in the center of the road with my head on a swivel. As soon as I look at anyone, though, they get right back to work.

Am I going crazy? Is the black hole in my gut playing tricks on me?

My heart is pounding in my ears. I know there's definitely something around here…

"Um, excuse me…"

"!"

I spin around and raise my fists to defend against the source of the voice. Onlookers probably think I'm overacting.

A girl, a human like me, is standing there.

She wears a white blouse with a light green knee-length skirt. On top of that is a salon apron.

Her simple blue-gray hair is tied into a tight bun on the back of her head, but a ponytail sticks out from the center of it.

Her eyes, the same color as her hair, look innocent and rather cute. She's so scared that her smooth, milky skin is all bunched up around her eyes. Oh yeah, my fist is a few inches from her jaw…

She's no threat. What the hell is wrong with me today?

"S-sorry! I was just a little surprised…"

"No, no! I'm sorry for startling you…"

Now she's apologizing just as furiously as I am. She didn't do anything…

She looks older than me, but just a year or two tops.

Was this the girl I saw on the café terrace? She was carrying a table all by herself…

"Um, can I help you?"

“Oh… yes. Here, you dropped this.”

A bluish purple crystal sits in her outstretched palm.

“A magic stone? Huh?”

I crane my neck around to look at the pouch strapped to my lower back. I use this fist-sized pouch to hold all the magic stones I collect from monsters in the Dungeon.

A drawstring usually keeps it wrapped up pretty tight. Is it loose? I thought I exchanged all of the stones I collected yesterday at headquarters. Did I miss one?

Only adventurers would have magic stones in the first place, so maybe she’s right.

“Thank you for going out of your way!”

“Oh, no. Don’t mention it.”

I return the smile that blooms on her face. My eyebrows drop a bit in shame. I have no idea what to say, so I just chuckle along with her. My shoulders finally relax as she good-naturedly hands me the stone.

“Are you already heading to the Dungeon at this hour?”

“Yep, I thought I’d get to work a bit early today.”

She asked that question to break the awkward silence. I didn’t know what to say myself, so I’m glad she spoke up. I’ll try to say good-bye after a little small talk.

… Or so I thought. My stomach speaks up before I can make a clean getaway.

“……”

“……”

Her eyes go wide.

My face goes red.

I hear her laugh a little. My face feels hot enough to cook an egg. Nah, it would burn…

“Ha-ha. Are you hungry?”

“… Yeah.”

“So, you didn’t have any breakfast this morning?”

This is so awkward. I can’t look her in the eyes, just drop my head and nod.

I see a little light flick on in her eyes. She suddenly turns and runs quickly to the café, her boots clopping on the Main Street pavement. She disappears into a side door and returns almost as quickly as she left.

She has a charming little basket clutched in her arms. Bread and cheese are sticking up from the brim.

“If this is okay… I mean, the café isn’t open yet, so all I can offer is my morning rations…”

“Eh? No, no, no. That’s your breakfast! I can’t accept it!”

She looks a little bit shy and bites her lip.

Whoa… She’s one of those inner-beauty types.

When I see Ms. Wallenstein or the goddess, I get butterflies. Not so

much with this girl, but the more I talk to her, the cuter she looks…

The goddess would call her a “good girl next door” type of girl.

“I can’t leave you hungry like this. It would make me sad as a person to do that. So please, Mr. Adventurer, accept it, for me.”

“How can I say no to that…?”

How can I possibly refuse something offered up like that? I don’t have the guts to say no to that smile.

She closes her eyes for a moment while I search for my next words. When she opens them, a mischievous smile creeps over her face. She leans forward until her face is just a few inches from mine.

A little too close…

“Mr. Adventurer, I’m making this sacrifice for you. So in exchange for the bread and cheese this morning…”

“In exchange…?”

“You have to eat dinner tonight at the bar I work at.”

“……”

It was my eyes’ turn to get wide.

I slowly chew over her words.

This girl has completely destroyed the ice. This is the first time we’ve met, and she’s laughing like we are old buddies.

“You don’t play fair, do you…?”

“Hee-hee-hee. Here you are! Don’t worry about it because I’m sure I’m going to make a lot of money today!”

Basically, “spend a lot of money tonight!” Great.

What’s with her? Isn’t that a lot of pressure to put on someone you just met?

“… Well then, I’ll be seeing you tonight.”

“Yes! I’ll be waiting!”

She laughs for me as I leave. Sure, I feel a little manipulated, but I also feel good, kind of like we just had tea together or something. Why am I suddenly so shy?

I hold the basket in one hand as she sees me off.

I look down Main Street, toward the tower at the center of the city. Lines of tall buildings pierce the morning sky, but the center tower looms over all of them. The Dungeon is waiting below it.

Something very important pops into my head as I take my first step. So I turn back to her.

She looks a bit confused. I take a deep breath.

“I… I’m Bell Cranell. What is your name?”

A heavy second passes as I squint my eyes waiting for her response. They pop open when she smiles at me.

“I’m Syr Flover, Bell.”

We exchange names, laughs, and waves before I set out.

The Dungeon was here before the gods came down to our world.

There was a city above the Dungeon, too, just much smaller than it is today. I've heard the Guild was there as well.

What I'm trying to say is that there were people who joined the Guild and fought monsters without receiving a blessing.

"Gwyaaa!"

"Haaaa!!!"

Part of me doesn't believe it was possible. The other part of me is completely awestruck with admiration for the adventurers of old. I have a blessing, but I only recently got strong enough to slay kobolds. Those guys fought and slew monsters that were far more powerful in this very dungeon.

"Shyaaa!"

"Hyaaa?!"

"Gyuee!"

What if?

What if those adventurers were here now, in the present?

What if a warrior who could dominate enemies with pure power was here?

If that warrior were in my situation, he could mow these monsters down and pick his nose at the same time.

"GRUOOOOOR!"

"There's just no way!!"

I can't do this.

"Damn it, you coward!!!"

"GRAAAAAA!!"

I turn my back to the group of kobolds and run like hell. The six of them shoot out after me, all of them tenacious fiends.

I'm still in lower Level One of the Dungeon.

All I can see are the dark blue walls and ceiling as I run by. The floor spreads out in all directions in this sky-less maze. The path forks suddenly; there are many intersections, and even some slopes in here. I'm pumping my arms as I run back the same path I always take through this level.

It's still morning, and I'm pretty sure I'm the only one here. I was playing it safe, staying on Level One, and had the luck to run into a group of these bastards.

There were eight of them at first. By some miracle, I took out two before I got surrounded. But when the rest spread out like a net, I had no choice but to run away.

Kobolds don't do that—at least they aren't supposed to. Usually the dog-headed beasts wander around alone or in pairs and attack with

sharp claws and fangs. I realize I'm a newbie and all, but I've never seen kobolds act like this before.

The Minotaur yesterday, and now this.

I must be cursed or something.

"Huh?"

That's it! This part of the floor is a loop! I jump behind two corners and hold my breath.

Run around forever like yesterday or ambush them. I choose ambush. As soon as they turn that corner, I'll make my move.

I may have a plan, but my heart is still testing the limits of my rib cage. Damn, I'm nervous.

If other adventurers were here, they'd laugh through their noses and call me an idiot.

However, the halls of lower Level One are wide. Going against a group of enemies isn't a good idea; you'll get surrounded. No matter how much you run around, a one-on-one battle will never happen. So says Dungeon theory, anyway.

There's also a risk of being caught in a pincer between two enemies.

If I'm going to survive this, I have to attack.

"……!"

Clop, clop, clop. The thumping sounds of their feet are closing in.

I look down at all five of my fingers, clenching ever tighter to my dagger.

I, Bell Cranell, am a dagger wielder. This particular dagger is about twenty celch long and is my only weapon.

My sweaty palm grips even tighter, and I try to focus through all the beasts' howls echoing through the corridor. Forcing my heart to be quiet, I take a deep breath.

The second I see their bloodshot eyes turn the corner, I spring the trap.

"Yaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!"

"Gehh?"

Time slows down. I lock eyes with their leader. Jump!

My reflection grows in its eyes. Strike!

Direct hit through the heart. That's one down.

The remaining kobolds round the corner half a breath later and jerk back in surprise. But I can't let up now! I grab the body of the dying kobold still on my dagger and charge headlong into the horde, using it like a shield. Two of them get bowled over by my surprise attack.

"Ga-ghaa?"

"Whaa!"

"Gyoogu?!"

I roll over the body, coming up clean and withdrawing my dagger from the first kill. The two kobolds I hit fall flat on their backs.

That one's close! Dive, slash down! Through the throat! That's two.

“Gyaoooo!!!”

“!”

“Gyo!”

The last three are moving! Coming right for me!

Duck, roll back. The one above me, it’s wide open, but my dagger won’t get there in time! I do the next best thing: kick. I bury my boot in its mouth.

Snap!

It crashes to the floor above me, its neck angled in a direction it’s not supposed to go. Third one gone.

“I win!”

“Kyaaann!”

I declare this battle mine.

The three left can’t surround me. Kobolds aren’t too bright. They won’t figure anything out. Especially now, since my dagger found the gut of the next jumper. Four down, two to go.

I see fear in the last two’s eyes. But I’m not stopping now. Two steps, two slashes, and the last two bodies hit the floor.

“Haaa—haaa—I… won.”

I sit down on the dungeon floor for a breather.

Did I just do that? I’ve never faced that many before, but somehow I did it.

Not even a scratch on me… Not bad at all!

There might have been a better way to face them. But I’m solo. There’s no one here to tell me how or give me orders.

Hell, I’m the only member of *Hestia Familia*. Without any veterans or allies to show me the ropes, I have to do things my own way. Do things “my own way”… Sounds nice, but I’m still just a newbie making things up as I go along. I’m not good for anything yet.

What if I asked someone from another *Familia* to train me up a bit? I mean, I don’t want to die doing things “my own way”… but wait. If I did that, I’d be a laughingstock. My goddess, too. What would the god of the other *Familia* think if I did that? Things would get way too complicated.

Any way I look at it, I’ll be better off alone.

As long as I “don’t go on adventures,” I can fight and win.

Do whatever it takes to fight against one monster at a time.

Stay in the upper levels.

Use the surroundings to your advantage.

“… All right.”

Time to stand up and get to work on those bodies. One of the slain monsters’ tongues is hanging out, like the kobold’s still trying to breathe. I don’t feel sorry for it but can still help it along. I raise my dagger over its body.

Flesh tears apart as I plunge the blade deep into its chest. Its body

flinches and blood squirts everywhere, but that doesn't matter. I'm after the small, shiny, bluish-purple shard in its chest.

The magic stone.

It's a crystal with magical power; all monsters in the dungeon have them. I know I'm always saying this, but I don't know much more than that. Maybe I should break down and read a book like the goddess is always telling me to do.

Anyway, the Guild pays cash in exchange for these beauties because of their magical properties. This is how I make money, collecting magic stones to trade.

The magic stones are used for many things through human engineering, like the lamp back at my room. The stones can be used to power stoves for cooking or even to freeze foods to keep them fresh. They are a valuable resource. Orario sells the stones to other cities and countries for big money, or at least that's what I've heard. I think the Guild should get the credit, though, not the city.

The stone that I took out of the kobold is actually just a shard.

Only about the size of my fingernail, it's not worth that much money. So far, the monsters I've slain on lower Levels One to Four have all had this kind of shard. The Guild pays more for bigger shards and full stones.

The kobold's body starts changing the moment I pull out the shard. At first, it flattens out like strings had been cut, and color drains from its face. Then without warning, its entire body turns to ash and disappears without a trace.

All monsters disappear after their magic stone is removed.

Eina said that the magic stone is a monster's core, its power source. The magical energy of the stone gives them life. Eina also said that a good strategy for taking them down in a pinch is to aim for the stones. If the stone gets damaged in battle, the Guild won't buy it. But I don't think anyone would complain about losing a little cash if they're about to get slaughtered.

I watch the last of the body dissipate, but I can't relax yet. I've got five more shards to collect here, and two back where I first ran into the group. I don't have time to let them just lay around.

Cut, slash, grab, pull. Walk to the next, repeat, walk farther still, repeat.

"… Huh?"

I just pulled out the magic stone of one of the kobolds, but one of the claws on its right hand didn't turn to ash. It hit the floor with a *plop* and rocked a bit. The claw isn't going anywhere.

Looks like this is a "drop item."

Sometimes a piece of a monster's body stays behind even after its stone has been removed. It just means that particular monster's stone stored energy in a different part of the body. So that part of the monster

has enough independent energy to stay behind even after the stone is removed. It also means this kobold had a very sharp claw…

I can sell this, too. The Guild will sell it to the blacksmiths, and they will make it into a weapon or something. If this is high enough quality, I might get more for it than the magic shards!

"Finally! A little luck!"

I put the shards into my pouch, but I put the kobold claw into my black backpack.

My backpack may look bland, but it has a few secrets. It was made with high-quality material and woven with magic. It can hold more than your average sack. It's not perfect, though. If it gets too full, the seams will tear. And of course, the weight. There really is no perfect item, is there…

Usually a "supporter" travels with adventurers and collects all the magic stones and drop items. But *Hestia Familia* doesn't have any supporters, just me. I have to carry everything I pick up, and all that stuff gets pretty heavy. Ah, soloing in the Dungeon…

Maybe I should hire a free supporter, someone not in any *Familia*. Eina's been disappointed with me recently, so a supporter might help.

Then again, we're broke. How can I hire someone when it's all I can do to buy food and items?

"UAAHHHH!!!!"

"Gyaaaa!!!!"

"… Round two?"

Come on! Give me a break!

The Dungeon is a weird place, even if you ignore the magic stones.

This is the only one in the world. Like I said earlier, it's been here since before the gods arrived on Gekai.

There are legends about the bottom of the Dungeon. They say it's connected to Hell or some magical world. You'd think the gods would be able to tell us what's down there, but they never give us a straight answer.

"The Dungeon is a dungeon. What else can you find there other than a dungeon?"

Words of the wise for sure. The gods really must like this place.

I was shocked the first time I heard that the Dungeon itself is "alive."

It's not like the walls are made of muscle and chase you around; they don't move at all. In fact, adventurers have mapped out many of the floors. The maps are for sale at the Guild. I heard that the farther down you go, the floors get mind-numbingly huge. So the maps are less and less complete the lower the floor.

When I say alive, I mean it heals itself. If a wall is damaged or destroyed one day, it's back to normal the next.

The magic stones may not be that impressive, but the dungeon itself

is made from something really special. Even our best scientists can't explain how or why these things happen. All they can do is watch and marvel at it.

The walls have to be made of something a lot like magic stones. Sunlight never reaches inside, and yet it's always bright enough to see. The ceiling of the first floor is speckled with tiny lights like sparks all over the place. No matter what time of day it is outside, it's bright in here.

Let's not forget the monsters. They're born in the Dungeon.

Literally, in the Dungeon. They hatch from the walls. I'm not kidding. Many adventurers have seen it firsthand. That's why no matter how many monsters are slain, their numbers never go down.

But they don't hatch just anywhere. Each floor bears different monsters. Sure, some irregulars might go up or down a floor or two, but most stay on their birth floor. On a side note, the deeper the floor, the stronger the monsters.

The floors themselves are connected by stairs, slopes, what have you. If I make a mistake and get lost, I can't warp to the Dungeon entrance. No one can. We're not gods, you know? Adventurers and monsters can only rely on their feet when in the Dungeon.

Monsters are only born in the Dungeon.

So if the Dungeon is contained and managed, there is no threat living above it.

That's how the first guild was formed. Now the benefits of the Dungeon and the Guild go hand in hand.

A goblin nearly killed me several years ago when I was a kid. Most likely it descended from goblins that escaped from the Dungeon before the Guild was here. Monsters live far and wide across the world as well.

So yeah, they can breed just fine.

A place that spawns prosperity and danger, very mysterious…

It's kind of scary to think about, but I think that the Dungeon isn't originally part of this world, just like the gods and goddesses weren't. There is no way humans and demi-humans built it.

Of course, there's no way to confirm that, it's just my gut feeling.

"—seeh!"

"Gobbyaaaa!"

How did I not see that goblin in the middle of the hallway?!?

Direct hit to my stomach, his foot got inside my ribs!

I catch a glimpse of his bulging eyes as my body folds under the force of his kick. I roll backward.

Those eyes… I can still remember them from when I was attacked. Add in the pasty green skin, and you've got a good idea what haunted my dreams for years. But now that I received a blessing, I can kill them in a heartbeat, just like this. What a difference…

I remember when I first saw one in this Dungeon my first time here. I

was so scared I couldn't move. Feels like ages ago now.

"Oh! Another drop item!"

This time it's a goblin fang.

I put it into my backpack, but the extra weight is really getting to me. Feels like I'm carrying bricks in that thing. My spine itself is talking to me—that's not a good sign.

There's still plenty of room in the bag, though… If I'm fighting goblins like that one, I can still move like normal. I think…

"Gyshaaaa!"

"Eh? Dahh!!"

—Correction. I should call it a day.

Sure, it was a sneak attack, but I should have been able to dodge that attack completely.

Another goblin was hiding in the shadow of the wall; now he's standing in front of me and baring his fangs. We lock eyes as I unhook my backpack and set it on the floor.

I can't take any chances. Even if I'm not going on adventures, danger lurks around every corner in here. Didn't Eina say that the most dangerous thing an adventurer can think is, "Ah, whatever"?

I should head back. Exchange what I collected today and just head home. It's not that big a deal.

I wonder if Ms. Wallenstein will ever be interested in me. I have no damn clue how to get her to notice me, but as I am now… I don't have a chance!

Just thinking about the face of my savior lights my soul on fire.

I have dinner plans tonight. Better make sure I get enough money to eat something at Syr's bar. I promised her I'd be there. Gotta get more shards than usual to cover it. I've already spent half a day prowling around down here.

Time to kick some ass!

"Hey, goblin! Right back at ya!"

"Buweee!!"

Now he's in pieces.

Bell Cranell

Level One

Strength: I-82 → H-120 Defense: I-13 → I-42
Utility: I-96 -> H-139 Agility: H-172 → G-225 Magic: I-0

Magic
( )
Skill
( )

"… huh?"

It's early evening.

After coming home to the hidden room under the church after a hard day's work, I couldn't believe my eyes.

The status paper the goddess gave me… These numbers can't be right.

"Um… Goddess? Are you sure these numbers are right?"

"… What? Do you think I'm too stupid to copy down numbers?!?"

"N-no! It's not that, it's just…"

I don't understand how my status could have gone up this much.

The goddess sounds like she has a thorn in her side or something, but she's sure about this. Maybe I should look one more time, just to be safe.

I tried really hard today. I'd say I did damn well.

But this… There is no way I improved 160 points in just one day!

What the hell were the past two weeks then? I barely went up a few points a day until yesterday.

"Goddess, something has to be wrong. Look here. I got hit once today, once! And my Defense goes through the roof?"

"……"

I only took damage from that one goblin. My armor blocked one, and I ducked and dodged all the others. Suddenly my defense goes up 29 points? It's more than triple what it was when I left this morning!

I've been hit by plenty of monsters since I started and only went up 13 points. One kick does this?

"This isn't right, Goddess. I… um… Goddess?"

"……"

Something is definitely wrong.

She's in a bad mood, a really bad mood. Her eyes are scaring me.

Her childish face is glaring at me through half-closed eyes. I don't even have to ask. "I am pissed" is written all over her.

Why…? What did I do?

I've never seen her like this. What do I do now?

Sweat is rolling down my forehead. Hey, I bet that goblin felt like this a few hours ago…

"Goddess…?"

"……"

"Um… Goddess?"

"……"

"Please tell me, why did my status go up so much?"

"… Hell if I know."

She puffs out her cheeks and turns her back on me.

She's cute when she's mad… The heck am I thinking?

I've never seen her act like this. Maybe she's at a difficult age?

"Hmph."

She stomps off to the closet making angry sounds along the way. Even her ponytails twitch with rage.

Shaking with fury, she opens the closet and pulls out a custom overcoat. Throwing it over her shoulders, she walks right past me toward the door.

"I have something to go to for my part-time job. Have fun 'spreading your wings' and eating a gorgeous meal *by yourself*! Be lonely for all I care!"

BANG! She slams the door so hard the room shakes.

She didn't look at me the whole time… "Something to go to"? Like what?

What just happened…?

She has to be mad at me, but I have no idea why…

I just know I made her mad. Maybe I'll remember something on the way. Ahhh…

I need to cheer up before getting to Syr's.

The sun is sinking into the western sky.

The red rays of sunlight are being replaced by the bluish glow of the moon and lots of lively voices.

Adventurers back safe from the dungeon and people who just finished a hard day at work are indulging in a well-earned ale. Happy and angry voices pour out of all the bars that line Main Street. Orange light emanating from inside the pubs bathes the streets with the shadows of their patrons.

I'm sure I met her somewhere around here this morning…

I wander through the human traffic of Main Street, looking around like a lost puppy.

It's so different from this morning. All these people are making it hard for me to recognize any buildings or landmarks. Am I really in the same place?

The bars are at the center of the storm of energy swirling around me. Demi-humans are smiling, drawing people off the streets and luring them into their respective establishments. A group of prums and gnomes, the shortest of the demi-human races, are standing shoulder to shoulder and singing to their hearts' content. Even a dwarf—a strong race known for their adventurers, I might add—joins in their jolly circle to hum a few notes.

Female animal people, a race of demi-humans with animalian ears and bushy tails, try to bring in customers with some very "playful" clothing. But they are put to shame by a line of Amazons walking by wearing not much more than loincloths. The Amazons don't seem to care about all eyes following them as they strut down the street. I tear my own eyes away from their little parade and keep walking.

Music, strings and wind instruments by the sound of it, breaks through the din of the nightlife.

So this is Main Street at night…

"… This should be it…"

I remember that terrace from this morning. I stopped just in front of it.

The building is made of stone. It's two stories tall like the rest, but it looks very deep. It might be the biggest bar in the area.

This has to be Syr's bar, The Benevolent Mistress.

Quite the name, and quite the sign it's written on. I step up to the door and take a peek inside.

Opening the door, I immediately see a stout dwarfess, probably the owner, behind a counter and a group of young cat-people girls in aprons serving food and alcohol to customers. Looking around the place, all the employees taking orders and carrying food are girls!

Don't tell me, the entire staff is female?

The name wasn't lying…

Oh boy… Isn't this place a bit out of my league?

There's even a proud elfess working here! I clear my throat. I wonder which one will come to greet me? I've fantasized so many times about a place where all these beautiful flowers are right in front of me… Well, the dwarfess wasn't really what I had in mind, but hey.

This place isn't all that risqué, but look at all these ladies! I've never seen so many pretty ones at once before! It's enough to make my face turn red.

It really is cheerful in here, though. The waitresses are hopping from table to table with big smiles, and customers are happy. This place feels alive! Most of the patrons are male, and adventurers by the looks of them. They come off a little intimidating, but they're happily drinking with their buddies. And the food looks amazing!

The decorations and style of the bar are pretty contemporary compared to other places, but it still feels like a bar. The terrace off of the main entrance adds to its flare. Speaking of the terrace, someone's looking at me… I can feel someone's eyes going right through me.

But anyway, I bet the terrace is a major draw for men and women.

However, I want to leave, like right now.

"Bell?"

"……"

Syr? How long has she been standing beside me?

My mouth twitches, so I slam my lips together and try to force a smile. Worst smile ever.

It will have to do.

"… Here I am."

"Yes! Welcome!"

She's still wearing the same blouse, skirt, and apron from this morning.

I follow her through the still-open entrance. She faces the crowd and takes a deep breath.

"Now seating one!"

Do they really announce everyone who comes in? At a bar…?

I just need to follow her and do my best to blend in.

I'm new at this, too.

"Please have a seat here."

"T-thank you."

She leads me to a counter seat.

The counter is a long *L*, and she places me at the small corner seat at the end. The wall is right behind me, I'm right in the crook of the building. There's only one seat in this nook, so no one can sit down next to me. Basically it's just me facing the owner behind the counter.

Maybe Syr realized this is my first time and gave me a good seat to get my feet wet?

I won't bother any other customers here and can eat at my own pace.

She might be going out of her way to help me.

"So you're Syr's guest, eh? Ha-ha, you got a charming face fer an adventurer."

Please leave me alone…

The dwarfess is leaning halfway over the counter, scanning me with almost dark eyes. I have feelings, you know? And I like my space, thank you very much.

"Just give us a holler if you need somethin'! I hear you're going all out tonight! I'll keep the food comin', all you got to do is keep on orderin'!"

"?!?!"

Her words had to sink in a bit.

Wait, wait, wait! Who said…? Syr! She's right behind me, if I can just get her attention. She looked away! What is going on here?

"Who said I was going all out? That's news to me!"

"… Hee-hee-hee."

"What's so funny?!?!"

Trying to pull a fast one on me, you witch?

"Well, I told Mama Mia that I invited someone here tonight, and I kinda talked you up a bit and things got a little out of hand…"

"That was on purpose, wasn't it?!?!"

"I'm rooting for you!"

"Please, just clear this up!"

So much for the "good girl next door"! She's an evil witch!

"I won't be going all out! My *Familia* is dirt poor, it's impossible!"

"… I'm so hungry… Couldn't eat breakfast… My strength… It's leaving me…"

"Oh ha-ha! What's with that tone? Cut it out! This is a real dirty game you're playing!"

This is way too much stress for just keeping a promise! They're scamming me!

“It’s just a joke. I wanted to have a bit of fun, that’s all. Please, take your time and order when you are ready.”

“… Okay. But just a little.”

Clever girl, this one.

I hold back a sigh and turn to face the counter. I remove the menu from a trendy stand and take a look. My eyes find the prices before the food.

I exchanged enough loot to get 4,400 vals before coming here. I slew more monsters today than ever and picked up a few drop items on the side. My pockets are much heavier than usual right now.

Fifty vals’ worth of food is enough to fill me up, but weapons, armor, and items are really expensive. I want to get some better equipment, but one healing potion costs 500 vals a pop! I barely have enough to pay for repairs for my own weapon and armor.

My dagger cost me 3,600 vals, and I had to take out a loan from the Guild to cover it. I finally paid them back for that and my armor, but they’re really taking advantage of adventurers…

I’ve got plans for this money. I’d like to save some, too.

I guess I’ll have some pasta. Bye-bye 300 vals…

The food here all has a flashy style to it. This is my first time eating food at a bar, but other places have to be cheaper than this…

“How ’bout some ale?”

I politely refuse the owner’s offer. I’m underage, but more than anything, I don’t have the money.

She just ignores my words and thumps one down on the counter anyway.

Why did she even bother asking?

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

“… I’m a bit overwhelmed, actually…”

Syr comes back when I’m about halfway through my pasta.

There’s a hint of irony in my voice.

She unties her apron; her dusty blue hair shakes as she pulls it over her head. She puts it up on a hook on the wall, drags a stool up to me, and sits down.

“What about your job?”

“The kitchen is a little busy, but the others have everything else covered. Things are slowing down a bit, too.”

She shoots a pleading look at the owner, asking for permission.

The owner raises her chin in a jerking nod, giving her the okay.

“Well, first let me say thank you for this morning. The bread was delicious.”

“No, no. You coming here tonight made my empty stomach worth it.”

“Don’t you mean it was worth it to force me to spend a lot on dinner?”

I didn't think I'd be paying this much for food; I have the right to complain.

Syr laughs with a smile, bowing her head and saying, "Sorry." I hope she's serious.

After that, I ask her a bit about the bar itself.

This bar, The Benevolent Mistress, was founded by an ex-adventurer, the dwarfess behind the counter. Her name is Mia, but the employees here usually call her "Mama" or "Mama Mia." She got permission from the god of her *Familia* to retire from dungeon crawling and open up shop. I suddenly had a lot more respect for the lady behind the counter.

She only hires women, period. However, Mia employs all types of girls with questionable backgrounds and welcomes them with open arms.

"What about you?" comes out of my mouth without much thought. She simply says it looked like a fun place to work.

"We've become pretty popular with adventurers recently, so money is flowing in. The pay is good, too."

"… Are you one of those people who's in love with money, Syr? Kidding, kidding! But because so many different people come here…"

She turns away from the counter and looks across the main floor of the bar.

A human waitress lightly bends over to take a dwarf customer's order. There are elves looking at their food with hungry eyes. A group of prums is living it up on the other side of the room.

Everyone is raising their glasses and drinking until they're red in the face.

"More people means more possibilities. I get really excited just thinking about what I might discover on any given day."

Her eyes are smiling…

Ahem. She made one of those fake coughs as soon as she saw me looking at her. Her cheeks are turning red, too.

"Anyway, that's how it is. I guess meeting new people is fun. My heart yearns for it."

"… That's quite the hobby you've got there."

I'm not all that different. I get excited just seeing all the people on the streets of Orario.

That might be the best thing about the city and the people who live here: you learn something new every day.

The moment that I find some common ground with Syr, the doors suddenly open and a group of about ten new costumers files into the bar. They must have made a reservation because they're all led to an empty table in the opposite corner of the main floor.

The band is comprised of many different races. I'm pretty sure they're adventurers—strong ones, too.

Isn't that…!

My heart jumps.

I caught a glimpse of blond hair so shiny it could be made of real gold.

Her body, so delicate and feminine it would break if you touched it, looks more like a spirit or a fairy from legends than a human's. She doesn't walk, she glides.

Her big golden eyes… so clear, so pretty. I just gasped a little.

The one whom I admire above all others is part of the group of formidable adventurers coming into the bar.

There's no mistaking her.

Aiz Wallenstein…

"… Ooho!"

"They royalty or somethin'?"

"'Course not, moron. Look at the emblems."

"… Meh."

Other customers just figured out that this troop belongs to *Loki Familia*. A new tone of whispers spreads throughout the bar.

"So that's them." "… They're the "giant-killer *Familia*, eh?" "Aren't they first-class all-stars?!" "Who's the kenki I've heard so much about?"

Waves of awe echo through all of their voices. Some of them whistle at Ms. Wallenstein and other female members of the group as they walk past.

I'm just as awestruck as they are.

To think I would see "the one" in a place like this!

W-what do I do?

"B-Bell?"

Should I go over there and say thank you for saving my life…? No, no, no. I'd just look stupid. Even if I went over there, what the hell could I say? "I love you! Let me take you out!" Yeah, right. I need to calm down. She doesn't even know my name.

Okay, just watch.

"… Bell…?"

I can use the bar as cover; don't want *Loki Familia* to see my red face watching them from across the room. I feel like I'm stalking my prey in some vast savannah and the trap has been set. Syr's looking at me with concern on her face, but I'm too busy to notice.

Ms. Wallenstein's seat is facing directly toward me. *Screech*… The sound of their chairs on the floor fills my ears, but my eyes are locked firmly on her.

"Yes-sa! Great day out there in the Dungeon today, people! Time to cut loose! Drink up!"

One of them stands up and makes a toast. His back is to me, so I can't see his face.

They all start talking at once. Loud clinks of glasses, cutlery hitting plates, shoveling food into their mouths. But Ms. Wallenstein just has a

small plate in front of her, taking her time.

As if *Loki Familia*'s toast was some kind of signal, other patrons remember they have drinks and food, too. It's like the room flipped a switch and went back to normal.

"*Loki Familia* members are regulars here. Their goddess, Loki, seems to like it here."

Syr just whispered the best news I've ever heard into my ear, her hand up like a wall to keep anyone from overhearing her.

But I understand loud and clear.

If I come here, there is a good chance of seeing Ms. Wallenstein.

My eyes follow every one of Ms. Wallenstein's movements. How she laughs when someone tells her that her face is red from drinking. How she talks with her female teammates, her energy, her smile. How she delicately wipes the side of her mouth as if caring for a young fawn.

I can't say I'm proud of spying on her this way, but how else could I have gotten information like this without my own two eyes?

She likes to talk about this, she laughs like that…

My whole body feels like it's burning red. I've never felt like this before.

"Yeah, Aiz! Tell us that one story!"

"That one story…?"

My body freezes. One of them called her Aiz.

A young male animal person sitting two seats diagonally across from her requested the tale.

He has a handsome face, but also a very manly aura. I'm male myself, and I have to admit I like his style.

"You know the one! About those Minotaurs that got away! Remember, you finished off the last one on the lower fifth! You know: tomato boy!"

Lightning shoots down my spine; the butterflies are gone. Something else is taking their place.

My mind is frozen. My body won't move.

"Are you talking about the group of Minotaurs that attacked us on the lower seventeenth floor, and they ran away when we fought back?"

"Yeah, yeah! That one! By some miracle they ran up! We tore after them! Already damn tired, too!"

The only mode of transportation in the Dungeon is your own two feet. Since there is no convenient way to reach the lower levels, adventurers who go there pass through the same path over and over.

Therefore, adventurers need to be prepared for both the trip down and the trip up. If you just go as deep as you can, you won't be able to make it back and will be lost forever. *Familias* that go into the Dungeon need good leaders with a strong sense of how far to go and when to turn back.

The story so far:

Loki Familia was on some kind of "expedition."

They encountered a group of Minotaurs on their way back but couldn't slay them all.

The remaining Minotaurs ran toward the surface. They caught up to the last one on lower Level Five.

Ms. Wallenstein delivered the final blow.

And at that very spot…

"Yeah, and there! That 'adventurer'! Damn newbie kid!"

… Me.

"Got himself cornered like a lil' bunny! Shaking like one, too! Poor thing was about to explode!"

Every inch of my body is burning. I might explode right now.

"Oh? What happened to the boy? Was he okay?"

"Aiz here carved up the Minotaur at the last second, ain't that right?"

"……"

My jaw won't close. My eyes are locked on that guy, my neck not budging an inch in any other direction. Something's gotta give.

He cocks his eyebrows, upping his manly presence.

"The kid took the full blast of that stinky cow's blood, got soaked! So, tomato boy! Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ahhh—Ow, my ribs!!!"

"Woah…"

"Aiz, please tell me you weren't trying to do that! I'm begging you!"

"… No, I wasn't."

The animal guy is laughing so hard he's tearing up. The rest of the table, too. They're laughing at me. Even the customers around them are trying not to laugh.

"And get this! Tomato boy! He ran away, screaming his head off! Gya-ha-ha-ha! Our princess saves him, and he just buggers off!"

"… Hm."

"GYA-HA-HA-HA-HA! Absolutely priceless! Aizee scares away a newbie! You are sooo awesome!"

"Ha-ha-ha… I'm sorry, Aiz, but I can't take this anymore!"

"……"

"Ooooh, don' make them scary eyes! It ruins yer cute face!"

The entire *Loki Familia* table erupts with laughter.

I feel like they just blew a hole in my chest.

It's as if the whole world is in that corner.

"Um… B-Bell?"

I can hear Syr's voice, but it goes in one ear and out the other.

Their conversation is starting back up.

"But really, it's been a long time since I've seen something so pathetic! So disgusting I could cry!"

"… Hmmm."

"The hell was he doing? If you're gonna cry like a little bitch, you shouldn't be down there in the first place! Right, Aiz?"

"……"

I can almost hear my own head caving in.

"It's weak adventurers like him who give us a bad name. Just give it up already!"

"Shut your mouth already, Bete! It was our mistake that let the Minotaurs escape! That boy had nothing to do with it! And stop drinking! Learn some respect!"

"Oh-oh! You elves and your pride! But yeah, what's in it for you to protect that piece of shit? Saying it's our fault, you're lying to yourself! Just to keep your pride! Trash is trash! What's wrong with calling it what it is?"

"Hey, hey! That's enough! Bete, Reveria, relax! You're killing the mood!"

—tick, tick, tick

"Eh, Aiz! What did you think about him, the pathetic piece of shit who was shaking in front of you? Do you think he deserves to stand at our level, as adventurers?"

"… I don't blame him for acting the way he did under those circumstances."

—tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick

"Why you acting all Goody Two-shoes? Okay then, I'm changin' the question. Him or me—who's got it going on?"

"… Bete, are you drunk?"

"Shut it! Now, Aiz! Choose! As a female, which male wags your tail? Which male makes you hot?"

—tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick

"… I have no reason to answer that question, especially to you, Bete."

"You're absurd…"

"Quiet, hag!… Well then, what if that piece of trash came up to you, said he liked you, would you take him?"

"… Hm."

—tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick

"Of course you wouldn't! Why would a tiny kid who's so weak, feeble, and all-around nauseating have the right to even stand next to you? There's no way he'd measure up!"

"A tiny kid could never land Aiz Wallenstein!"

I stand up, the chair flying backward.

I tear my eyes away from their table and make a break for the door.

"Bell?!"

The street is jam-packed with people and buildings, but I don't care.

I focus on getting away. Someone is calling my name, but it's just sound to me now.

It's really dark out, but I don't care. I'm gone.

"Bell?!"

A young waitress pursued a boy's shadow as he burst out of the bar in a full sprint. Some of the other customers realized something had happened, but it was so fast that no one really knew for sure what was going on.

Confusion spread through the main floor of the bar.

"Did someone just dine 'n' dash?"

"At Mommy Mia's? The guy's got guts, that's for sure!"

Bete and the other adventurers in the corner table ignored the rest of the patrons' comments, but Aiz stood up.

Her well-trained eyes shot through the crowd and caught a clean look at the shadow just before it got away.

A thin body with white hair.

Slightly downcast ruby-colored eyes shone from under the bangs—just like the boy from yesterday.

Could that be…?

She shuffled her way to the front of the building and leaned on a pillar in the entrance to look outside.

Looking to her right, all she could see was the back of the young waitress as she ran into the crowd on Main Street.

The boy was nowhere to be seen.

Bell…

She mouthed the name that the young waitress yelled into the night.

For whatever reason, she heard his name more clearly than the voices of her comrades currently tapping on her back.

"Oi-oi, Aizuuu, what'cha doin'?"

"……"

A woman had left the table and now stood behind Aiz. She wrapped her arms around the blond girl's body. The woman pressed her hips into Aiz's backside and took a squeeze, body and breast. Aiz lost her breath for a moment.

If this person had not been the goddess Loki herself—or a woman at least—she would have been quickly dealt with. Aiz held herself back, unable to just throw her off.

However, she didn't have to put up with it. She grabbed the arm coiled around her stomach and drove her elbow into it. Loki stepped back a bit in surprise, giving Aiz enough space to spin around and bury her palm in the goddess's cheek.

"Chee, ya're feisty! Ya don' look it at all, Aizuu!"

"Hands to yourself."

Loki was shaken and looked as if she was about to burst out crying

before suddenly smiling with Aiz's dark red handprint still pulsing on her face. She looked to the sky and yelled, "Shy 'n' cool! Soooo my type!"

Aiz couldn't look at her. It was too embarrassing.

"Don' be makin' that face. If Bete's gettin' to ya, I'll have Mommy Mia to string 'im up outside!"

Loki must have misunderstood why Aiz had left the table in the first place.

Looking back inside, members of their party were holding the young animal man down while the elfess with whom he had argued earlier tied him up.

The elfess smiled as she stood over him, her foot pinning him to the floor.

"Hee-hee, Aizuu. Come on back."

"……"

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Loki wrapped her arm around Aiz's shoulder and guided her inside. Aiz fought it long enough to look outside one last time.

Even with the magic stone lamps lighting the busy street, the boy was long gone.

Storm clouds hovered in the night sky; it could have rained at any moment.

Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!!!!

Bell was running. Tears flowed from his crooked eyes, falling to the ground behind him.

The events of the last hour were replaying in a loop in his mind.

He was so embarrassed, so humiliated, so ridiculed that he wanted to just disappear for the first time in his life.

Why am I so damn stupid?!?!

Each of that animal man's words cut deeper every time he heard it.

Weak, feeble, trash, tiny, nauseating, pathetic, disgusting, little bitch…

The question burning in his mind wasn't "What can I do to get close to her?"

It was "If I don't do something, I don't even have the right to stand next to her."

That animal man's words, and the laughing faces around him, awakened violent urges within Bell.

But he was angry at himself; his do-nothing-and-expect-the-best self.

This hurts… hurts…! HURTS!!!

It hurt to know that everything that guy said was absolutely true.

It hurt that he couldn't respond, defend himself.

It hurt that he was nothing more than a funny-looking rock on the roadside to her.

It really hurt that he didn't even have the right to talk to her.

"…… Eh?"

His ruby-red eyes looked up from the ground to take in the scene before him.

The entrance to the Dungeon was waiting for him beneath the white tower, door open.

He was going in, to prove them all wrong.

Holding back his tears, Bell ran flat out to the base of the tower.

Chapter 3
NIGHT BEFORE AWAKENING

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Chapter 3

NIGHT BEFORE AWAKENING

Heavy rain pounded the office window.

Eina looked up from her desk to take a look outside.

It's really coming down…

Not too long ago, a golden moon lit up the sky. But now black storm clouds unleashed a deluge of water onto the city.

People still out on the street were dashing to the protection of eaves and awnings. Main Street emptied in the blink of an eye.

Eina put down the paperwork she had been working on and listened to the rain. Leaning back in her chair, she watched the rain cover the landscape.

"Eeeeh? First we get stuck with overtime, and now it's raining cats and dogs! No luck at all…"

"… It came on pretty quickly. The rain should let up by the time we're done here."

One of Eina's coworkers moaned about the rain as she stumbled up to her desk carrying a small mountain of files.

It was almost nine o'clock. Guild headquarters' staff still lined the lobby windows and filled the office nearby, every one of them wrestling with overtime and paperwork. Eina's human friend and coworker had had enough, despite all the bosses saying, "It's the final stretch!" and looking all-important as they worked through their data.

"I know it's almost time for the festival and all, but I wish the bosses would cut us some slack, you know? We aren't all as productive as you!"

"Misha, don't lean on me like that. You're getting in the way!"

"Hee-hee. Wait a sec, Eina. Did you already put away the festival plans?"

Casually brushing aside Eina's hand, Misha's eyes grew as she scanned the papers on her coworker's desk.

Plopping her own files down on the corner of Eina's work space, Misha snatched up one of the papers before her colleague could protest.

"Oh, one of your adventurers' profiles, right? Hey, this is your new

guy, isn't he!"

"… I was told to give an update to our team leader, so I was putting the finishing touches on it."

Eina had given up trying to keep the girl back and answered her with a long sigh.

Misha held an adventurer profile in her hands. It had only the most basic information such as race, personal history, and *Familia* allegiance neatly written in an easy-to-read layout. All adventurers in Orario had profiles on file at the Guild.

At the top of this one was the name "Bell Cranell."

"What?!? He's been here two weeks, and he's soloing on the lower fifth?! This guy's incredible!"

"No, he's not. He got cocky and wandered down there without conquering the other floors first. He got to the lower fifth on sheer dumb luck, and he nearly died there."

Eina's elegant eyebrows rose as she remembered all the advice she had given Bell, only to have him completely ignore it.

Eina's harsh tone came from a genuine concern for the boy's well-being. Misha chuckled a bit at the worried looked on Eina's face.

"Sure, but that was the Minotaur that escaped from *Loki Familia*, right? He may be a newbie, but Minotaurs even give veterans a run for their money."

"Yes, the Minotaur was an irregular. But for the boy, for Bell, the lower fifth is a death trap."

Eina plucked Bell's profile from her coworker's clutches and looked over the information she had written with her own hands.

"Everything changes at Level Five—the monsters get stronger, the Dungeon path is more complex. As he is now, Bell would die if he went in there again."

His armor and weapons weren't strong enough. He was going in alone, no allies to protect or support him.

What's more, his status was far too low. He was still a newbie, after all.

The Dungeon would not take it easy on him just because he had started only half a month ago.

Eina came to the conclusion that it was far too early for Bell to venture to the lower fifth or below.

"Well, anyway. As long as I'm drawing breath, I won't let him go into the deeper levels."

"Aren't you being overprotective? Are you falling for him?"

"… Eh?"

Eina hadn't been expecting that.

Completely unprepared, Misha's question made her heart skip a beat.

The moment Bell had yelled "I love you" yesterday was still fresh in Eina's mind. It didn't seem like a real confession of love, but his face

looked so innocent. Before she knew it, Eina's cheeks had turned a rosy pink.

Realizing that her pointed ears were getting hot, the half-elf Eina calmly took a deep breath and locked eyes with her human coworker.

"Ohhh, scaaarrryyy!"

Misha picked up her pile of files from the desk and flashed a smile. Eina glared at her colleague's back and sunk into her chair.

I hate being teased…

He was like a younger brother to her—she'd scold him, and he'd vigorously apologize. This scene repeated in her mind. She giggled as she remembered how he'd nodded his head. Her memories felt so real.

Bell… What are you doing now?

Eina once again gazed out the window at the rain that was getting heavier.

The downpour showed no sign of letting up, as if the sky were raining anger from the heavens.

Step.

Kick off from the ground.

"Iiiaaa!"

My blade flashes, faster than before.

The monster behind me crashes to the floor, making a short squeal.

A bulb-eyed frog monster is gushing black liquid from massive cuts all over its body.

It attacks adventurers with a long, spear-like tongue, a "frog shooter."

It's not worthy of pity. I feel nothing looking into its sunken, dead eyes. Just keep moving forward.

Pain in my arms and legs doesn't matter. I will slay anything that moves. My feet take me deeper into the Dungeon.

A flat floor, smooth walls, and the ceiling are my guides.

I wander around aimlessly in the tasteless air of the Dungeon.

It's colder than this afternoon and dead quiet. There is nothing around me—no monsters, no adventurers, just these walls and the chill.

My boots echo with each step. They're keeping me company through these winding halls.

"……"

Feels like a ghost should come out at any second, that kind of echo. I look down at my body.

No armor, just my usual street clothes. Slashes and gashes from various claws and fangs are all over me. My clothes have been shredded. They look like something a criminal would wear while committing a

felony.

My right hand grips a blade I keep on me just for emergencies. My arm drips with the blood of who knows how many monsters.

I'm a mess…

That's not a problem. I can keep going, but I rest my eyes for a moment.

Run, run, run, how much did I run?

Through the crowds of Main Street, away from that bar, into the Dungeon.

I found monsters, slew them, ran to the next, slew them, too.

Slash, slice, stab… How many have I cut?

Just how weak am I? I lost myself for a while.

The thought of my own weakness fueled my rage enough to make it this far with just one knife.

I have to close the distance between me and her, no matter what. I have to get to her level as soon as possible.

A flame burns in my heart, and I let it consume my whole body.

… Where… am I?

What do I do now?

What happened after the bar? I only remember a few flashes here and there. I take a deep breath and rack my brain for clues. I hunted the monsters—I remember that much—but everything else is so cloudy…

I open my eyes and take a look around. The walls are different, kind of a mossy green. The corridor is really thin, too, with more paths breaking off than I remember.

I've never even seen a frog shooter before, come to think of it.

This is the fifth… no, lower sixth floor.

I came down six flights of stairs starting at the main gate. This has to be the lower sixth.

It seems I'm exploring a new floor.

I continue forward without fully grasping what I'm doing. The idea of turning around never crosses my mind, still numb from the night's events.

I look around for my next target. Nothing is moving; it's just me and the echoes now.

"Ha… ha… ha…"

My breathing is a bit rough. Maybe I'm pushing too hard?

How long have I been in the Dungeon?

Sure, the sparkling specks on the ceiling make it easy to see, but they don't tell me the time of day. It could be noon. I have no idea. I don't have a watch, either. Oh, well.

… What's this?

I've been walking a while. This spot looks a lot like my room under the church.

Except it's a full square, and there's nothing in here. Light green

walls, looks as bleak and deserted as the church…

I'm already halfway in, but I don't see any other paths. Seems like there's only one way in or out of here.

I should turn around; this is a dead end.

What is that?

Crack, crack

"__"

Getting louder…

There's nothing here, no monster could hide behind anything… Such an eerie sound.

Nothing left, nothing right, I can't see where it's coming from!

It's just me and that sound. My echoes are gone. It's drilling into my ears!

Is it possible that my senses improved along with my status? That has to be the only explanation.

If that's true, I should be able to follow my ears to the source of the noise.

The wall! It's coming from that greenish wall!

Why would a wall be making noise? The walls aren't alive…

A crack! Spreading! It's right in front of me!

"……!"

Monsters are born from the Dungeon walls!

A new monster is being born, right here, right now, from inside this wall. Right in front of me. Monsters don't emerge as babies. They are born as full-fledged, battle-ready adults!

The Dungeon, the only place in the world that gives birth to a threat to humanity…

A massive, three-fingered hand bursts through the crack. It's flexing, grabbing at the air. A foot! The other hand now!! It's coming out of the wall! Pieces of the Dungeon wall are breaking off and falling to the floor, adding even more echoes to this dead-end square.

The creature lands on the floor with a *thud*; the last pieces of the wall come crashing down around its feet.

There is only one word to describe it: *shadow*.

It's probably about 160 celch. This monster is about as tall as me. Its entire body, head to toe, fingertip to fingertip, is pitch black. Shape-wise, it looks almost human. It has no skin pattern or hair, just smooth black shadow.

Its head looks like a pointed plus sign, with a big, silver, round part in the middle.

The freaky shadow straightens up and turns to face me.

This is the lower-sixth-floor monster, "Wall Shadow."

"Ke……!"

Behind me! The wall is cracking! Don't tell me another one is being born right here!

I'm caught in a pincer!

No, the room is wide enough, so I have room to move. Still, it's two on one. Not good.

But this timing… Did I fall into a trap laid by the Dungeon itself? So this is the Dungeon's true face.

"……"

The two Wall Shadows silently flex their bodies as they surround me, getting ready for battle.

Their silver "eyes" are flashing like dying magic stone lamps surrounded in fog. They are locked onto me, their "prey."

"…… Haaa!"

A deep breath. My blood-stained knife is as ready as it's going to get.

I'm probably too far gone, trapped in the lower sixth, no armor, no hope.

But the flames that ignited at the bar are still burning. Everything I heard that guy say, that's all that I care about.

That pain is far worse than this. The fire within me will be more than enough to keep me going.

There is a voice in my head, telling me to run. But I say fight!

Wall Shadows have sharp "fingers."

There are three of them sticking out of unusually long arms. They are knives, plain and simple. They're on the move! These guys make kobolds and goblins look like child's play. They're fast!

It's safe to say that Wall Shadows are the most dangerous Level Six monsters in terms of pure power.

Adventurers who stay in the upper dungeon, lower floors one to twelve, need to be extra careful when one of these things shows up. It may be the last thing they see.

"Gaha!"

I would agree with that assessment.

Slicing pain! I'm hit already!

Their attack patterns are shockingly strong and fast. Black arms flash in every direction; my skin and clothes are being sliced up like tissue paper.

Their reach is too long! I can't get close enough to strike back! They aren't letting me!

These monsters are on a whole other level!

I can't counter, I can't dodge, I can't get away.

They're just too damn strong.

"……"

"Gaaaa!!!"

These silent killers are aiming for my head.

I catch a glimpse of one of their black blades out of the corner of my eye. Dodging at the last second, it passes just past my ear. The other one! Coming straight for me! Dodge right.

Front, side, behind, their attacks are coming from everywhere.

These strikes just keep coming, like they're swimming through the air.

I'm getting dizzy, barely avoiding fatal blows by spinning like a top.

My blood and sweat are flying everywhere. I'm engaged in a dance of death.

This is serious. I might really die down here.

Hang on, I'm breathing. Very heavily, but I'm breathing…

… *Why?*

I feel really impatient, but at the same time, something feels different…

Calm… I feel a stream of calm energy flowing through my body.

Despite this hopeless situation, my mind is clear. I look at my opponents with clear eyes for the first time.

—Why am I still alive?

Why didn't I realize it before?

How did I make it to the lower sixth with my body still in one piece?

Why am I able to fight with the monsters around every corner on this floor as equals?

I don't understand. How can someone who has only been an adventurer for two weeks survive on this floor on his own? I've encountered Wall Shadows! I shouldn't be able to dodge their attacks!

The half-elf Eina told me as much. She warned me!

I remember she clearly said my status was far too low, low even for a newbie! She told me that my attacks wouldn't make a scratch on these monsters!

—*Sta… tus?*

A light flips on in the back of my mind. My status went up way too much earlier this evening.

It can't be…?

The hieroglyphs on my back, could they be the reason?

"Gaaaou!"

I need to focus, that last hit rocked my whole body.

The Wall Shadows took advantage of my wandering thoughts and found an opening.

The back of one of their hands slammed into my shoulder. Not only was I thrown onto my back, but my knife flew out of my hand.

I hear the metallic blade hit the stone floor. My only weapon is gone.

"!"

A shadow rises above me, striking to kill. I quickly roll to the right to dodge.

The other Wall Shadow is standing above me now, taking aim with its right arm.

Suddenly, my eyes narrow.

Time slows down. I see everything.

Memories flood in with breathtaking speed. Everything I've ever seen, heard, or done lights up behind my eyes.

There she is, my savior bathed in silver light.

"__"

The smile of a special person, the goddess who gave me this power.

"Kke!"

I can move! I feel strong, stronger than ever!

I jump up from the dungeon floor and punch the Wall Shadow in the face.

Long black arms fly by my cheek. I can feel the skin on my arm being scraped off as I plunge my fist deeper into the monster.

New echoes have joined me: the sounds of the Wall Shadow's face being crushed.

"……?"

My fist plows through the creature's head. Throwing all my weight into a right counter worked!

A thick black liquid spurts out of the wound in the Wall Shadow's head lodged around my arm. The creature's arms cross where I was just a second ago, but they've gone limp. It falls to its knees as I burst through.

"Fm!!"

I've got momentum, can't stop now!

The remaining Wall Shadow stares as I pull my black-blood-stained arm from its former comrade. The last monster squares its shoulders, preparing for my next move.

I make a break for my knife, snatching it off the floor before turning to face the beast one more time.

The animal man said I look like a "bunny"? I'll prove him right!

Jump, pivot, step, roll, it can't stop me! I get inside its reach before it can block.

The Wall Shadow's muscles are firing, launching an attack. But I already have a step.

Slash.

My blade tears a clean slit through the Wall Shadow's chest.

I catch a glimpse of a flash of light from deep within the open wound. The monster's magic stone was severed.

"__!!"

The beast lets out a silent scream as its jet-black body turns to ash.

I stand there for a moment, my arms and knife still outstretched, and watch its figure dissipate. As the last pieces go up, I finally let myself breathe.

"Haa… hh… haaa… hh… ha!"

I lean back as my lungs suck in massive amounts of air.

The tension gone, my body is really screaming at me now. That was too close, but I'm still in one piece. My heart pounds in my ears; just keeping my eyes open is a pain.

I'm in bad shape, but how bad?

I wasn't ready to fight any of those monsters: I shouldn't have been, anyway. But I did, and I won. It has to be my status, that's the only thing that could go against everything I've been taught. That's the only way I could have grown enough to do this and survive.

What's happening to me?

The first step to figuring all this out is getting out of the Dungeon alive. I'm on the verge of collapsing, hands on my knees and trying to inhale the city itself… I can't take much more of this.

I need to get out of here, now.

I take one step toward the exit, and another, just trying to move forward.

"You shall not escape."

Am I hearing things…? That wasn't a voice…

"—!"

Oh shit… The walls are echoing, breaking, breathing! Left and right, there's a spiderweb of cracks opening in every direction! Here come the Wall Shadows, lots of them.

… The first reason Eina told me not to come down here unprepared: the number of monsters born from the Dungeon walls dramatically increases from the lower sixth… no, lower fifth floor.

I'm stunned. I don't think I can even speak right now. And more things are howling from beyond the exit door.

I can see their eyes reflecting the light from the ceiling.

"… haaaa."

Here they come, one after another. Lower-sixth-floor monsters bar the only way out.

There goes my clean escape. I'm surrounded. Wall Shadows are on my left, right, and behind me. Various other beasties are in front. And they're all coming for me.

But I'm calm. Seriously, my head is cool and clear.

"……"

I step into a defensive stance… Wait, what's that on the ground?

A drop item? Must have come from one of the Wall Shadows… A finger blade!

One of the three must have been left behind. I can use this! There's no grip, just the long blade itself. But what choice do I have?

It cuts into my left palm. My blood drips off the tip of the blade.

—Ah, whatever.

Armed with two knives, I stare down my enemies one by one.

Even in this hopeless situation, I don't feel like my number's up.

I have to reach the next level, get closer to her.

I don't have time to play with the monsters down here.

I'm in the eye of a storm of howls and roars, but I'm different now.

The symbols on my back are pushing me forward. My blades are ready.

I charge headlong into their advancing ranks.

Chapter 4

THAT'S WHY I WANT TO HELP

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Chapter 4

THAT'S WHY I WANT TO HELP

Time-marking clicks echoed throughout the room.

The clock on the wall showed five in the morning.

Hestia paced back and forth around the room under the old church, her home.

He's way too late…

She crossed her arms and scrunched up her eyebrows. Anxiety was pulsing through her veins.

She had lost her cool after seeing how much Bell's "crush" on Aiz had caused him to grow last night.

She couldn't even enjoy the drinking party with her coworkers. All that was there to greet her when she came back was silence. Bell wasn't home.

She had told him to eat alone, but his not being back in time to welcome her home just made her even angrier. She skipped taking a shower and jumped into bed with every intention of falling asleep. Ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock passed, and he still hadn't come back. That was when Hestia realized something was very wrong.

All her anger at Bell had kept her awake this long. Giving up on sleep entirely, she kicked off the bedcovers and left the room to look for him.

"Where did you go…?"

Her search bore no fruit.

There had been no sign of the boy's signature white hair anywhere. Hestia's last ray of hope was that Bell had returned while she was out. However, the room was still empty when she'd arrived.

All she'd gotten from her strenuous search was tired legs. Her nerves were starting to get to her as well. She was now officially a wreck.

Is it because of I said to him? But he's the kind of guy who puts other people first; he wouldn't make me worry just because he's upset… Usually he'd be here with his head down apologizing by now…

Bell's face had been like that of an abandoned baby bunny when she

last saw him. She ran through their last conversation a few more times in her head.

The thought that it was her fault Bell was gone once again crept into her mind, but she shook it off.

She knew this wasn't the time to be buried in her own misgivings. Taking a deep breath, she mulled over the possible reasons for the boy's absence.

If I'm not the reason he hasn't come back, then that means…!

Something bad had happened to him. She was sure of it.

Her forced calm fell apart like a sand castle. She broke out in a cold sweat. She couldn't just stand here knowing that something had happened to him. She grabbed her cloak and headed to the door to go outside and look for him again.

"—Gyahhh!"

The moment she reached for the knob on the square door, it swung open.

And hit her smack in the face.

At the same moment, her personal pillows went *squish* as the door stopped on contact.

Hestia's faith shot up 100 points!

She let out a high-pitched squeal as she grabbed her face and crouched down.

"G-Goddess? I-I'm sorry…"

Suffering from the agony of an unforeseen attack, Hestia looked up between her fingers at the figure standing in the doorway.

Realizing it was the boy that she had been worried about all this time, she jumped up to greet him.

"Bell?!?"

It was him, just as she had expected.

Relief flowed through her. She was about ready to cry, but she was lost for words when the light hit him.

He was looking at her with big eyes, almost begging for forgiveness. But his face was covered in cuts, red with blood and brown from mud. He looked utterly exhausted.

His upper body was in rough shape. Hestia's eyes spun as she looked at the shreds of cloth draped over his shoulders. They had been a shirt when she left. The skin peeking out from under what was left of his clothes was crisscrossed with gashes and swollen.

His lower body was even worse. His pants were stained with who knew what and frayed all to hell. However, there were three gashes across his right knee that had to come from a very sharp knife. Black and still bleeding, they were the worst injuries on a body riddled with them.

Hestia went pale as she carefully approached him.

"What happened to you? What's with all these injuries? Were you

mugged?!"

"No, it's not that…"

"Then what the hell happened?"

"I went into the Dungeon…"

As the words rolled off her tongue, she forgot her anger for a moment and just stood in awe.

"Are you crazy?! You went into the Dungeon like that? At night?!?!"

"… I'm sorry."

Bell did not have any armor whatsoever on his body. Going into the Dungeon like this was the same as going in naked.

One hit from a strong monster, and it would be over. Bell's condition was proof of that.

He may have had a knife for protection, but the lack of thought and consideration for his life shocked Hestia to no end. Going into the Dungeon like this was not fearless, it was foolish.

"… Why would you even try this? You're not some thrill seeker, so what was going through your head?"

"……"

The more Hestia looked at Bell, the less she wanted to scold him. He was not himself; he seemed darker, almost brooding. So she decided to change her tone to try to get a response out of him.

Bell showed no signs of opening his mouth. His hair covered his eyes. He was flat-out refusing to open up.

Hestia sighed, beside herself.

"Okay, okay. I won't ask you anything else. You're pretty stubborn, I can't win."

"I'm sorry…"

"I said it's okay, didn't I? For now, you need a shower. The bleeding has almost stopped, but your wounds are dirty. I'll treat them when you are done."

"… Thank you."

Bell showed her a small smile. Although she was still hurting inside, Hestia smiled, too.

She stepped away from the door to let Bell inside, but he staggered forward.

The injury on his right leg must have been serious.

Cursing her lack of height, Hestia offered her shoulder to the struggling boy. She had to stand on the balls of her feet to keep him upright.

"I-I'm sorry."

"All you do is apologize. If you really are sorry, think about what you did."

"A-aahh, sorry…"

"Again?"

Hesita half carried Bell toward the shower room. It was next to the

bed behind an old, white wooden door. The door hung at a strange angle because one of the hinges was loose.

Hestia focused all of her strength to keep Bell upright as they made their way through the room. Just in front of the shower room, Hestia got an idea.

"Bell, sleep on the bed tonight, okay?"

"Are you sure…?"

"Of course! You're hurt, and I can't drag you all the way to the sofa, now can I?"

She knew that he needed sleep, first and foremost, to heal his injuries. It was the least she could do to give up her bed to help him rest.

As soon as she finished offering her bed, she got another idea. Why not tease him a bit?

"But I'll be sleeping in the same bed. I'm exhausted from going out and looking for you, you know? You wouldn't refuse, would you?"

"Yeah, sure. You must be tired, too. Let's get some sleep together."

"… Eh?"

Bell completely missed her teasing tone and accepted the condition right away. Caught completely off guard by his words, Hestia felt as if she'd been hit with a right hook. She quickly collected her thoughts; her heart had to recover. What was she going to do now?

Was she taking advantage of him? He was completely spent. There was no way to tell if he even knew what he was saying.

Damn it, Bell! You're so close…!

Hestia's teeth clenched as she thought about what Bell had just said. Her face turned pink as her heart jumped.

We can snuggle! No, we will snuggle!

Visions of what was to come filled her mind as she made mental notes about the size and weight of the boy she was holding up.

She had his word. He couldn't get away now. *Yay!*

"Goddess…"

"…! Wh-what's wrong?"

Bell's voice woke her up from her daydreams. She rushed to respond.

Had he seen through her plan? Hestia was sweating bullets as she waited for Bell's next words.

"… I-I want to get strong."

"!"

She craned her neck to look up at his face.

He was looking straight forward, but not at anything in particular.

Hestia took a breath and looked back at the shower room door. She said, "Yes…" and accepted his words.

Bell Cranell

Level One

Strength: H-120 → G-221 Defense: I-42 → H-101
Utility: H-139 → G-232 Agility: G-225 → F-313 Magic: I-0

Magic
( )
Skills
Realis Phrase
Rapid Growth
Continued desire results in continued growth
Stronger desire results in stronger growth

"—!"

Hestia's hands stopped moving in an instant.

Her eyes were glued to the thin back of the boy beneath her. His status was laid out before her as if she had opened an ancient book of hieroglyphs.

The information expressed in the Falna she had given him sent shivers down her spine.

A day had passed since Bell's return.

He screamed when he'd realized he was sleeping next to the goddess. He spent a full day in that bed and awoke at his usual time the next morning to find himself in that predicament. It was still early, so they decided they might as well do a status update.

It was just how it always was: Bell facedown on the bed without a shirt, the goddess sitting on his rear end, pricking her finger and dripping blood on his back… The only thing out of the ordinary was the numbers floating to the surface, a completely unbelievable status.

He's growing too fast.

Bell was the first member of her *Familia*, and thus he was the first human to receive her Falna, her blessing. A few of her friends had told her some things about how blessed children grow, but she wasn't an expert.

She didn't know how to make them get experience quickly, how to unlock their skills, or how to release the magic within them.

She only knew that the status on his back was not normal, at all.

This wasn't growth. It was leaps and bounds.

There might not be another adventurer like him…

If everyone grew at Bell's pace, then most adventurers would be in Level Two, almost to Level Three.

Most adventurers had a difficult time reaching Level Two, so much so that most Level Twos were members of large *Familias*. More than half of adventurers never advanced beyond Level One.

Bell's status was currently the equivalent of two average, veteran adventurers' statuses combined.

The only time a blessed person's status points went up 10 points or more at once was during the early stages of his or her career. Then they usually hit a wall and came to their god to complain about it.

Very few of them made it past that first wall. The rest just went around in circles.

Why did he grow this much…? The only possible explanation is…!

There was something swelling within him.

Hestia, the only one to know about the skill Realis Phrase, bit her lip as her head spun.

The children had an emotion called "jealousy." This emotion was rocking Hestia to her very core.

"Goddess?"

"!"

Bell was looking over his shoulder, trying to figure out why Hestia had stopped.

"Aah! Sorry! Sorry!" she said, trying to reassure him and returning to work. At least she acted like she was getting back to work. She was almost finished anyway.

What should I do…? Just give the status to him as it is…?

Sudden confidence and strength led to arrogance.

Hestia knew that much. She knew that all the children, not just humans, had this weakness. Arrogance led to carelessness, and then to death.

Part of her wanted to believe that Bell wasn't the kind of person who would be arrogant. But the other part said, "What if?" and she couldn't ignore that feeling as his protector. What if she lost him?

Trust and worry fought for control of her decision. But no matter how many reasons she thought of to trust Bell, worry kept winning out.

But if I don't give him the real status, I'll be lying to him…

That would interfere with Bell's growth.

If he didn't know what he was capable of, he'd fight enemies he had no business crossing blades with every day. What would this do to his status if he survived? Excelia tended to accumulate faster when the person fought against an opponent stronger than themselves.

No matter how good it would make her feel, lying to Bell now would be no different that personally cutting a hole in his hopes and dreams with her own two hands.

For a brief moment, Hestia did not think. There was only silence within her heart.

In the end, she chose to trust him.

Fighting back the "what if" with self control, she forced the scale to tip.

He was doing something that the gods could not change. It was well within her power to give him a push in the form of his status. *"I want to be strong."* Even if his motivation came from feelings for another, he had made up his mind.

"Bell, is it okay if I just tell you your status today?"

"Um, sure. That's fine with me."

Bell looked up over his shoulder as she told him how many points he had grown.

But she left out the part about his skill, Realis Phrase.

It's a rare skill, for sure.

Most skills were fairly common and had similar effects among adventurers.

While it was not fully understood how skills were acquired, the skills that had been confirmed to exist had different names and effects. It was still fairly easy to find another adventurer with something similar.

Furthermore, members of specific races tended to have similar skill sets. Many elves had skills that increased magic; dwarves usually had skills that improved their physical strength.

There were many different types of skills with various outcomes for all types of races. However, when an extremely low number of adventurers possessed a certain skill, it was considered a "rare skill."

The gods referred to it as such.

If he knew, things would get ugly…

She wasn't keeping the information about his skill away from him out of spite.

Sure, her jealously of Wallensomething was 70 percent (maybe 90 percent) of her reasoning, but there were other circumstances that were keeping her lips sealed.

Gods and goddesses were here to have fun. When news of a "rare" or "original" skill reached their ears, they pursued it like kids in a candy store. Their sparkling eyes went wide open. A little bit of drool oozed out of their mouths.

Some of the more foolish gods might even try to get the skill's possessor into his or her own *Familia*, ignoring the current blessing altogether.

Just playing a game.

Bell isn't good at lying. He'll tell anyone about his skill if they ask. Word will travel fast. So, just this one thing, I'll keep to myself.

The skill increased growth under certain conditions.

Realis Phrase was without a doubt an undocumented skill.

Hestia decided to protect Bell from the other gods by locking this secret deep within her mind.

Bell's jaw dropped as Hestia told him what was written on his back—other than his skill, of course. Hestia put the finishing touches on the hieroglyphs. It was the one thing she could do to help him.

"So, yeah. You grew quite a lot this time. Do you know why?"

"No… not really… Ah!"

"Yes?"

"Well… the other night I went down to the lower sixth floor…"

"*Huh? W-what?* Are you *crazy*?! What were you thinking? And with no armor?!?"

"I-I'm sorry!"

Hestia jumped to her feet and stood over him, glaring. She released a torrent of scolding and reprimands onto Bell, still shirtless on the bed.

"The point is, I don't know exactly why, but you are growing at an alarming rate. I don't know how long this will last or how high you'll go. Let's call it a growth spurt."

"U-understood!"

"… This is just my opinion, but I think you have great potential. You have talent and great instincts as an adventurer."

That skill couldn't be the only reason Bell had done this well so far.

It was only the spark that allowed him to grow so quickly.

There had been many indications of what he was really capable of doing.

A farm boy from the countryside with no teacher had survived near-death situations while prowling the Dungeon alone every day.

The skill Realis Phrase raised the basic status. It didn't teach how to attack, when to block or dodge. Only real experience in battle could do that. Even if he didn't have the skill, he was the only one who could make those decisions in combat. That was his true strength.

The fact that Bell had survived alone this long showed he had talent.

"… You will get stronger. And I want you to get even stronger than you are now."

"… Yes."

Bell sat up and looked into Hestia's eyes. She crossed her arms and looked back down at him.

She put all her heart into her next words.

"… I want you to promise me that you won't try to do too much. I want you to swear that you won't repeat the other night."

"I—"

"Your will to get stronger is amazing, and I respect you for it. I will encourage you, support you, help you in any way I can… So."

Her eyes glistened as tears started to flow. She pleaded with all of her being.

"… Please don't leave me alone."

Her pleas had an immediate effect.

Bell's shoulders sank as he looked upon her. His face was deep in thought, as though he was remembering another promise he had kept. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Stillness filled the air. For the two of them, it was a long silence.

"… I promise."

Bell raised his head.

His face looked pitiful, about to cry, but also happy and about to burst at the seams all at the same time.

There was not a hint of deceit in his smile. For Hestia, this face was far more trustworthy than any words.

Now, she was sure that this boy was worthy of her trust.

"I won't try too hard. I'll do my best to get stronger… But I will not leave you behind or make you worry. You will not be alone."

"I'm glad to hear that. I can relax now."

Fighting off the urge to jump into his arms, Hestia smiled at the boy.

She picked up his shirt from the floor and gave it to him. He said a quick "Thank you." She looked up at the ceiling as he changed.

… I'm so happy!

There was something she could do for him.

Her feet thumped on the warped flooring as she ran to a shelf in the kitchen. Most of the shelf was used for cookware, but she went to a box in the center and threw it open. Her hand flew around blindly as she fumbled for something hidden inside. Pulling the box down, she looked past the flyers and paperwork for her part-time job and found what she was looking for.

She grabbed an invitation entitled Ganesha's Celebration of the Gods.

Hephaistos will be there, right?

The face of the friend and goddess who found this room popped into Hestia's mind.

Getting in touch with Hephaistos was never easy because she was always working and traveling to many places around the city.

Hestia decided to use this party as an opportunity to see her friend in person.

The party started… tonight.

"Ah!" came out of her mouth as she quickly looked around. "Bell, I'm going to be out tonight. Maybe for a few days. That okay?"

"Eh? Ah, I understand. Something for work?"

"Nope. I wasn't really interested at first, but some of my closest friends are going to a party. I'm thinking I'll go and say hi. It's been too long since I have seen everyone."

"Then by all means, go!" Bell said with a smile. Friends were important. He had no reason to refuse.

Hestia felt bad for bringing this up out of the blue, but she smiled back and walked to the closet. None of her clothes were really appropriate for the event, but she grabbed the best dress she had and put it in her travel bag. A few more odds and ends and she was ready to go. All that was left was to request someone to cover her shift at work. She'd do that on the way.

She was almost out the door when she thought of one last thing.

"Bell, are you going to the Dungeon today?"

"I'm planning to, yes… Should I not?"

He had just made that promise. He timidly looked up at the goddess, expecting another lecture to hit him like a brick wall.

"No, it's okay, go ahead. But be extra careful, okay? You are still recovering, remember?"

“I will! Thank you!”

Bell looked so happy with dimples in his cheeks. He nodded to Hestia as she set out.

The sun’s rays stretch across the sky.

It’s late morning. Good time for a jog down Main Street. There are a lot of people out enjoying this nice weather.

I left the room not long after the goddess. Got my armor this time! On my way to the Dungeon now.

Yeah, the goddess was right. My knee is not happy. Whatever sixth-level monster got me had one hell of an arm. It’ll take some time to get back to normal.

Just another reason not to push it. No adventures for me. If I screw up, I’m heading home ASAP. But I’ll focus and do my best no matter what.

Ah, there it is. The Dungeon is still a bit far away, though. Up until a few days ago, I was impatient and would have run all the way there. But not now.

The goddess calmed me down quite a bit. My head is clear. All I need to do now is go forward as fast as I can.

It will take time, but this is the fastest way to catch up with Ms. Wallenstein. Keep going to the Dungeon, keep getting stronger. All efforts bear fruit eventually, right?

I can still hear the goddess saying, “Don’t do too much.” With the goddess’s words in my head, my feet stop in front of “that” place.

Yeah, there is something I have to do before going to the Dungeon today.

“This might be a little rough…”

Closed, huh…

I scratch my head as I think this over.

Got to face the music sometime, might as well be now. Just need to get a foot in the door.

Ding-ding. A bell rings as I peek my head through the entrance of The Benevolent Mistress.

“I am awfully sorry, sir, but we are not open just yet. Can I ask you to return in a few hours?”

“Nyow, Mia’s bar isn’t open nyet!”

An elf and a cat person were busy setting up tablecloths. They still responded to me right away.

They’re both very cute. Wearing the same uniform as Syr, there is no other way to describe them than simply pretty young ladies. I guess I have a thing for elves and their pointy ears because just hearing her voice has made me nervous.

"I'm sorry to intrude, but I'm not a customer. Is… um… Syr Flover here? And the owner, too."

"Kyaaaaa! The dine-and-dasher from before, nya! The one who came to give Syr an offering, nyand then abandoned her at the table, nya! That white-haired kid!! Nya nya!"

"You will be silent."

"Bnyya?"

"I apologize for my coworker. I will retrieve Syr and Mama Mia right away."

"Th-thanks…"

I didn't even see the elf move.

She just suddenly had the catgirl by the collar and dragged her away. Elegant, fast, refined… It's enough to make me sweat. There they go up the stairs. It's too quiet in here now.

I remember this place feeling like a bar. Now it looks and feels more like a café. Maybe they change the restaurant during the day? Adventurers are in the Dungeon, so they're trying to appeal to regular townsfolk?

Café… That's right. There's a terrace here, isn't there? They thought of everything.

"Bell?!"

Thump-thump-thump. Behind me, pattering feet. Ah, it's Syr, and she's running down the stairs?!

What would I give to just dig a hole and bury myself right here? Then I wouldn't have to face her. That's not going to happen. Man up, you can do this. You can start by walking up to meet her. That's it.

"I'm very sorry for what happened the other day. I didn't pay—"

"… No, no, it's okay now. I'm happy that you came back."

She's giggling? I should look up. I might be bowing a bit too low.

She's not even asking me why? Look at her, her arms open, a warm smile on her face. I could cry right here. No, tears, go back! Oh! I can act like some dirt or something got in them. Good cover! Okay, the money is in my backpack… There!

"Here, this should cover the food I ate. If that isn't enough, I can pay more…"

"I would never say it isn't enough! Your coming back is enough for me… And I'm sorry, too."

"You don't have to apologize…" Her words are too nice. All right, how about a handshake. Nice firm shake, ahhhh that might have been a bit too strong…

Yeah, she's rolling her shoulder… But she's laughing! Oh, what a relief!

She's smiling with her eyes! I'm so glad she's forgiven me! Hey, wait, where's she going? She looked like she remembered something important, and now she's disappeared into the back room…

There she is, and she's carrying a big basket.

"You are going to the Dungeon soon, aren't you? Please take this with you."

"Eh?"

"The chef baked our rations this morning, so they are very fresh. I did touch a few of them, though…"

"That's okay, but why?"

"Would you believe me if I said I wanted to?"

She tilts her head, has that same shy smile from before.

She looks so kind, gentle… I can't refuse that face.

Maybe she's rooting for me…? Cheering me on?

"… Thank you. I'll eat them before I go into the Dungeon today."

I'll take the basket, but I can't keep smiling with you. My cheeks hurt…

She's looking at me funny again. Her cheeks are going pink, too. I like her giggle, though.

"The boy's 'ere, eh?"

A voice from behind the bar, the door hinges are still creaking. Mama Mia…

Damn, she takes over a room! Gotta get out of here!!

No, I can't do that. Turn and face her.

Even for a dwarfess, she's pretty big. Her shoulders are double mine…

"Ah! I gotcha. Came back to pay the money, did ya? Ain't that nice o' you."

"You're… welcome."

"Syr, take a break, eh? You been in 'n' out all day."

"Yes, sure."

She makes a quiet bow. Mama Mia is coming this way! She's smiling, not a warm hearty smile, a bold smile. Uhff. That's her meaty hand square on my shoulder…

Now she's talking…

"If ya hadn' come back, we woulda released the hounds ta find ya!"

Gulp.

"If you'd been a day later, I'da enjoyed hearing me prey squeal again."

To think, I almost died twice in one night… She would have killed me…

Nice save, Bell! Nice save.

"Syr, that's your lunch he's carryin'. Ya okay with that?"

"Oh, yes. Missing lunch isn't that big of a deal."

"Why is okay to go hungry and give him nyour lunch, nya?"

"It just—"

"Oh-oh! Don't be rude nyow! You two are like that, nya? He's nyour __"

"Not that!"

I think Syr chased after the catgirl, but I couldn't watch them… There is someone a bit more important with her hand on my shoulder.

I will never do anything out of line in front of Mama Mia again, ever.

"Be sure 'n' say thanks ta Syr. Lot o' us here are not as forgivin' as she is. In fact, if she 'adn't said okay, you'd be swimming with fishes 'bout now."

"……"

She's serious…

"Syr chased after ya that night, but she couldn't find ya. Came back all depressed, mopin' around. That there elf, Lyu, grabbed a claymore from the back. Wasn' easy stoppin' 'er from huntin' ya down."

I may like elves, but I'm a long way from understanding them.

But… Syr chased after me… even when I was like that…

A new fire sparked to life in my chest. A good one this time.

I am really in Syr's debt. I have to figure out a way to repay her someday.

"… Oi, boy!"

"What is it?"

"Bein' an adventurer isn't for those who just look the part. Just fight to survive at first. Once ya build up a bit, the worst rarely happens."

My eyes shoot wide open.

Does she know? She was at the bar then, so maybe she overheard everything?

Wait, she's smiling at me?

"The best is always the last one standing, ya hear? No matter what it takes. Come on back an' I'll fix ya up with a large ale! Hey, ya won, didn't ya?"

Mama… Mia…!

"Don' be givin' me that weird face! Now head out, will ya? Yer in the way!"

Suddenly, a massive force spins me around and guides me out the door.

I may be out of breath, but coming back here was the best decision I've made in days!

I feel like the last of the shadows from the other night are finally gone. *Loki Familia*'s animal guy, I haven't forgotten what he said. But now it doesn't make me angry. It's fuel for my journey.

Do what you can now, as fast as you can, without doing too much. Just focus on surviving.

Sounds like the perfect plan to me.

"Oi, boy! I've said this much already, don' ya go dyin' on me now, ya clear?"

"I won't! Thank you again!"

I feel so alive!

“I’m heading out!” I yell back into the bar before heading into the crowded street.

Night.

A bright moon floats above the curtain of darkness that has fallen over the land. The moonlit forest is alive with the sounds of owls and rustling leaves.

These sounds ride the breeze and spread out over a vast plain to merge with chirping birds and swishing grasses. They flow together in a chorus of nature until the sounds hit one sudden change in the landscape.

A very big wall.

Big, thick, and sturdy, the edge of the city may as well be a castle wall.

The protective wall is constructed completely out of stone. The curtain of night is pushed aside as light spreads throughout the city. The voices of nature outside the wall are drowned out by the din of the city’s nightlife.

The Labyrinth City, Orario.

Orario is one of the few cities that have existed since ancient times, even before the arrival of the gods. However, it is the only “labyrinth” city.

The wall forms a perfect circle, encasing the metropolis in stone. Relatively tall towers and buildings stick up just inside the edges of the wall. Shorter buildings are toward the center. This stone behemoth is lit by hundreds of magic stone lamps. It’s as if a sea of stars came down from the sky to live in a stone castle.

One tower in the very center of Orario looks tall enough to pierce the clouds.

The tallest tower in the city, its imposing shadow strikes awe into the citizenry. Visitors come from far and wide to see the tower and bask in its glory.

The tower is directly over the entrance to the Dungeon below. Known as “Babel,” its main purpose is to be a “lid.” With Babel at its core, the image of Orario has spread far and wide around the world.

More adventurers call Orario home than any other city or country. The Dungeon is where all of the ancestors of monsters scattered around the world were born. Many people refer to the Dungeon as one of the world’s three great mysteries. A colossal “unknown” sleeps within the deepest part of the Dungeon. This “unknown” draws many fearless adventurers into its depths.

Of course, most of these adventurers are motivated by greed. A place that spawns infinite monsters and drop items provides an infinite source

of wealth. For those adventurers on a quest for glory, slaying particularly violent and dangerous beasts is the fastest way to become immortalized as a hero in tales of adventure. Orario was given the name "Labyrinth City" on a whim by the gods who lived there. They thought it made the city sound more interesting. Soon, Orario became known far and wide. Adventurers had nothing to do with it.

The excitement of the "unknown," the lure of wealth, a chance to attain glory and above all notoriety, draws in more and more people every year.

Among the newcomers, there may even be a few who come here merely for fun and a fated meeting.

"The most passionate city in the world."

That is what it's called.

"Ah! Look over there! It's the head of the dirt-poor *Familia*, Takemikazuchi! Oii! Hey, ooii!!—heh-heh."

"Ah! Isn't that the guy who has so little money every year his face is caving in, Takemikazuchi? Oii! Hey, ooii!!—hee-hee-hee."

"Quiet, you worthless deities!"

This was inevitable.

These were the gods and goddesses who came to Gekai looking for entertainment. They came to the passionate city Orario seeking the "unknown" even more than the adventurers. That was them to a *T*.

They were gathering in a specific part of the city.

Gods didn't normally get together in such high numbers.

"Yo!"

"Eeeeh! Long time! How long has it been?"

"'Bout four hundred years, I reckon."

"Ohoh! That long? You've changed quiet a lot since then!"

"Sorry to change the subject on you, but is the Celebration really here?"

One overly extravagant building stood over the group of overly extravagant gods assembling in the street.

Standing among the lights of Orario, this thing was just plain weird. It was so out of place, it was almost mysterious.

The building was a massive, thirty-meter, human-shaped statue with an elephant's head sitting cross-legged in the middle of the city block. The base of the building was surrounded by a stone wall.

The statue sat proudly, puffing out its chest. It was famous for inspiring a sense of wonder and uneasiness within anyone who saw it. Magic stone lamps lit up the statue from many angles. The elephant stood out against the black night sky.

It might have come as no surprise, but this building had a history.

It was built by the handsome, dark-skinned god Ganesha. Who knew what he was thinking when he burned through his *Familia*'s savings to

build this monstrosity.

This statue, Aiam Ganesha, was the home base of *Ganesha Familia*.

Even the members of his *Familia* didn't like it. Most of them teared up a bit as they went in and out, thinking how their hard work had gone into paying for this thing. The icing on the cake? The entrance to the building was in the crotch of the statue.

"What's Ganesha doing?"

"Ganesha really goes all out!"

The group of extraordinarily lavish people filed into the building through the crotch, laughing all the way.

Every one of these "people" was a god or goddess.

They had come for Ganesha's "Celebration of the Gods."

A Celebration of the Gods was basically a large party put on by a god for other gods living on Gekai. There were no rules about who hosted and who attended. The Celebration was hosted by a god who wanted to throw a party and was attended by gods who wanted to come. It was all done on a whim.

"Everyone! Thank you for coming today! I am Ganesha! I am overjoyed at the attendance of this Celebration! I love you all! I do have one small announcement to make: The yearly festival put on by my *Familia* is only three days away! Please encourage your *Familias* to attend!"

The great hall was only lightly decorated, completely different from the lavish exterior of the building.

Ganesha, wearing an elephant mask and dressed to match his statue, greeted his guests in a booming voice from the top of a stage in the middle of the hall. The gods in attendance by and large ignored his greeting and continued talking among themselves.

The party was set up to be a standing buffet. Tables with white tablecloths lined the great hall. An array of fresh food filled the hall with a variety of mouthwatering smells. Soft echoes from the shoes of both the attendees and the staff thumped from all directions. A band sat behind the stage, waiting for the signal to play dance music.

Almost all of the deities in Orario were in attendance tonight.

Invitations to the Celebration had been disturbed by the host's *Familia*. The number of guests was determined by their resources.

Ganesha Familia was very prominent in Orario, so he was able to send an invitation to every single god and goddess within the city wall.

Hestia included.

"Hey! Mr. Waiter! Bring me a stool! Quickly!

"Y-yes!"

Hestia was busy raiding the food tables under the din of conversing gods when she summoned a member of *Ganesha Familia*.

She was not tall enough to reach a particularly delicious-looking dish in the middle of a table.

Mine! Mine! Mine!

"……"

Her arms flew around from dish to dish as she gathered as much food as she could onto her plate.

Unable to say anything, the waiter just watched her in action.

Hestia had no plans of slowing down—it was a buffet, and she was going to take full advantage of it. *Hestia Familia* was among the poorest of the poor *Familias*. She was most likely the bottom of the barrel of all the gods in attendance. But Hestia didn't mind. She had no problem working so that Bell had enough energy to work in the Dungeon. Working in shops and doing odd jobs was just part of her life now.

However, she was the only deity there not wearing extravagant clothing. She was wearing her usual garb but had tried her best to make her clothes look more formal. It didn't fool anyone.

"Hey, isn't that Loli Big Boobs?"

"Wow, she's still alive?"

"I've seen her. She's working part-time in the northern south block. The children were patting her head."

"That's our Loli Lady!"

Of course, Hestia stuck out like a sore thumb. Shoveling food into her mouth and wearing ordinary clothes, she attracted a lot of attention.

Hestia knew they were making fun of her, but she decided to ignore everything and keep her mouth shut. At least until she found more good food.

"Just what do you think you're doing…?"

"… mmhnngg… mm!"

A very tired voice hit her from the side.

Spinning around with a mouthful of pastries, Hestia saw a goddess with flaming red hair and wearing a dark crimson dress standing next to her.

Her face was thin with a sharp chin, showing her strong will. In fact, even the golden earrings she was wearing could not compete with her sheer beauty.

However, Hestia couldn't help but notice black skin covering half of the goddess's face over her right eye.

A bandage covered most of it. She stared down at Hestia with her left eye. It was wide and looked shocked.

Hestia gulped down the last of the food in her mouth.

"Hephaistos!"

"I'm happy to see you, too, Hestia. I'm glad you are well… I'd be happier if you wore something a little more appropriate."

Hephaistos shook her head and rolled her eye. The magic stone lamps on the ceiling shone down upon the one-eyed goddess. Her waist-length hair sparkled as if it were woven with sugar.

Hestia took a moment to admire Hephaistos's beautiful red hair

before going up to her with a big smile on her face.

"I'm glad I came! I was right to come."

"What? I'm only going to say this once: I'm not lending you one val."

"How rude!"

Hephaistos glared at her "friend" as she snapped a warning.

She was the goddess who had looked after Hestia before she met Bell, the one who had kicked Hestia out of her *Familia*'s base. Their relationship was still a little tense.

While they had been friends for a long time, Hephaistos had lost her patience with Hestia because she hadn't formed her own *Familia*, hadn't worked, and had become a burden.

However, even after evicting her, the needy goddess would always come back asking for money. Whether it was "I can't find a job" or "I can't find a room that keeps the rain out," Hestia always had a sad story to tell before asking for help. She'd pushed Hephaistos as far as she could.

Hephaistos had a serious problem on her hands. She couldn't leave her friend out on the streets with no money, but she also couldn't keep helping her with every little thing.

In the end, she gave Hestia the room under the church and found her a part-time job. The only thing Hestia did by herself was induct Bell into her *Familia*.

She acted mature and independent when she was around Bell. But on her own, she was a lazy goddess who couldn't get anything done on her own.

"Do I look like a goddess who would do that?!? Sure, I needed your help in the past, but thanks to you, I'm doing fine on my own! I don't need to eat from anyone else's plate anymore!"

"Weren't you doing that just a second ago?"

"T-this food will just be left over… If it's just going to be thrown away, I should at least put it to good use, yes?"

"Ho-ho! That's a great way to put it. I'm so happy you've changed, my tears of happiness just won't stop."

"Gyuuuu…"

Hephaistos scoffed through her nose at Hestia's pained face.

Click-click, click-click. High-heeled shoes echoed as another goddess approached them.

"Hee-hee… Still the best of friends, I see."

"Eh… F-Freya?"

Hestia turned around to see emerge from another group of deities a goddess so beautiful that she made the others look normal by comparison. The floor was her runway. Everyone else was there to admire her.

Her skin was the color of fresh fallen snow and just as smooth. Freya's arms and legs glided through the air as if she were swimming,

her perfume getting the attention of other gods as she drifted past. Their eyes fell on her luscious derriere, the cloth holding it in place stretched way too thin. Her gold-trimmed, full-length gown was open in the front. With only one layer of fabric over each breast, she proudly showed off her full shape. Her cleavage was bright pink, like she was too warm.

She had the perfect body; better proportions did not exist.

Long eyelashes surrounded calm eyes that radiated confidence.

Her beauty transcended beauty, to the point that no one else even came close.

The Goddess of Beauty gently swished her silver hair as she glided up to the other two goddesses.

"Why are you here…?"

"Saw you standing here. Thought I'd say something like 'It's been ages' and invite you to walk around the great hall. Something like that."

"D-don't say it like that, Hephaistos…"

"Am I disturbing you, Hestia?" a smiling Freya asked the shorter goddess as she stepped into their conversation.

"It's not that…" Hestia fought back an irritated twitch in her lips. "I just don't like you very much."

"Hee-hee-hee. That's what I like about you."

Oh please. Hestia crossed her arms and looked away.

Being the Goddess of Beauty, Freya was a lady among women and always carried herself as such. She was always a head above the rest.

Freya had the ability to make others stop and wonder at her charm and grace. Even whimsical gods fell under her spell. The children on Gekai became enslaved by her smile alone.

However, Hestia couldn't stand Freya's personality, or other gods like her.

She did her best to avoid them.

"Hey! Fei-Fei! Freya—! Itty Bitty!

"Then again, you're not so bad compared to a few others I know…"

"My, my, aren't you tense."

Freya's smile widened as she turned to face the newcomer, who was flailing her arms and half jogging up to the group.

She had vermillion-red eyes and hair. She'd changed her hairstyle from a simple short ponytail to a stylish inward spiral just for the Celebration. She was sporting a sleek black dress.

She might not have looked like much standing next to Freya, but her face was on par with Hestia and Hephaistos in terms of charm.

"Yo! Loki."

"Why the hell are you here…?!"

"Wassamatta? Am I not allowed to greet ya without a reason? It's a Celebration, no? It'd be rude not to say hi. Get with the program, Itty Bitty."

"……!……!"

“That’s quite the scary face, Hestia.”

Loki was two heads taller than she; all Hestia could do was turn a cold shoulder.

She had nothing to say to Loki.

Loki was the enemy.

“It really has been a long time, Loki. Didn’t think I’d see Freya or Hestia today, either. The Celebration has been full of surprises.”

“Yeah, it’s been forever… Been forever for most everyone here tonight, though.”

Loki’s eyes were so long and thin that they usually looked like lines in the middle of her face. But she smiled as she opened them just enough to get a good look at Freya.

One of *Ganesha Familia*’s waiters arrived with drinks. He froze on the spot when Freya turned to take a glass. Smiling at the dumbstruck man, she took a long sip.

“Have you really not met up anywhere?”

“We did see each other the other day. Wasn’t much of a chat, though.”

“You’re one to talk. I made myself open to conversation, not my fault.”

“Hmm. Oh, Loki, I hear about your *Familia* all the time. Things must be going well?”

“Waaa! To hear someone with a *Familia* as good as yours say that… I must be moving up in the world… But yeah, my children are my pride ’n’ joy. Mind if I brag?”

A tinge of pink covered Loki’s face as she shyly scratched her head. Loki hid her feelings from the members of her *Familia*, but that was more difficult here.

Hestia had been listening to the conversation and thought this would be the perfect time to gather some information.

“Hey, Loki. I have a question for you about someone in your *Familia*, Wallensomething or other.”

“Oh! The kenki! I would like to listen in, if you don’t mind.”

“What’s this? Itty Bitty has a question for me? Someone look to the sky! Is it Armageddon? Ragnarok? Did Hell just freeze over?”

Hestia clenched her teeth. *I’m gonna tear this bitch in half!*

“… Here it is. Does the kenki have a boyfriend or some kind of special companion?”

“Moron, she’s my favorite. I ain’t giving her to anyone, ya hear? If anyone else tries to put a hand on her, I’ll mount their head on my bedroom wall.”

“Tsk.”

“Strange time for ya to *tsk* at me.”

Hestia got the information she was after. Aiz Wallenstein was being fiercely guarded by Loki.

She felt the same way about Bell. If only Aiz had someone special she wanted to protect… An evil smirk popped up on her lips.

Hephaistos stood by, watching the conversation unfold. Sensing the tension rising, she jumped in to change the subject.

"I know this is a little late, but it feels strange to see you in a dress, Loki. Don't you usually wear men's clothes?"

"Hee-hee, about that. A little bird told me a certain Itty Bitty was gettin' ready to go to a party…"

Hestia glared at her. Loki didn't seem to care. She bent over so she could talk directly into Hestia's face.

"Heard she was too poor to wear a dress, thought I'd laugh at her."

You bbbbbiiiittttttttccccccchhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!

Hestia locked eyes with Loki, her face getting redder and redder. She might explode at any moment.

It was always like this. They hadn't known each other very long, maybe a hundred years. However, whenever Loki saw Hestia, she had an undeniable urge to tease her… She would do anything she could to make a joke at Hestia's expense and would go out of her way to do so.

The reason was quite simple: Hestia had what she didn't.

It was all because of the two lumps on Hestia's chest.

"Ha-ha!! Nice one! To make me laugh by making fun of your complex in front of everyone! Loki, you're a comedic genius!"

"Wha'd ya mean?"

"Oh, sorry. Not comedic, you're a genius at digging holes. Like the grave you are standing in!"

Now it was Loki's turn to flame up. The goddesses scowled at each other, their faces getting redder with each breath.

Loki's black dress was very low cut with no shoulders. It was almost sad how little shape she had, other than her quivering rib cage.

"So it begins…," muttered a cross-armed Hephaistos as her eye went from one goddess to the other.

Freya held her glass of fruit wine as she looked on with a smile. The fireworks were about to start.

The two goddesses stood with their well-above-average busts bulging from their elegant dresses on the sidelines.

"How many men have fallen off the cliff of despair that is your flat chest? Ha-ha! See what I did there?"

"Not funny at all, you haggggggg!!!!!!!"

"Kiyaaaaaaa!!!!!!!!"

Loki lunged at Hestia, her eyes leaking tears.

Getting a good grip on Hestia's cheeks, Loki pulled as hard as she could.

Her face expanded out like taffy, soft and squishy.

Hestia tried to fight back, but her short arms couldn't even come close to grabbing Loki. She futilely swatted the air, her cheeks shiny

with tears.

"Oh, what have we here?"

"Looks like Loli Big Tits against Loki No Bits…!"

"Ten elixirs say that Loki walks away frustrated!"

"All of my star chips say that I'll be the one to comfort her!"

"Make a real bet, moron!"

More and more gods came to watch the catfight unfolding in the great hall.

Hephaistos's head drooped past her shoulders. She was already fed up with Hestia and Loki, now there was an audience to this brawl.

Loki was shaking Hestia's entire body with her death grip on the smaller goddess's fluffy cheeks. Left, right, up, down, she shook Hestia in all directions.

Shaking, shaking, and more shaking.

"… hee… hee… I'm thinkin' ya've had enough for today…"

She's twitching all over!!!

Sad that she couldn't finish the job, Loki dropped Hestia to the floor and turned her back.

Loki didn't even glance at the girl as she collapsed to the floor, just walked away. Loki's body twitched as she started to make her way across the room.

It was not a victory lap.

"Hmph… Don't be looking so pathetic next time, loser. Tuck your tail and run!"

"I'll do ya in next time, ya hear me? Next time!!!!!!"

Loki bolted for the door, leaving a trail of tears in her wake.

"Just as I thought…" A murmur spread through the crowd of gods who had come to witness the fight. With the show over, they went back to their own conversations and drifted elsewhere.

"Loki's really rounded out…"

"Rounded out?? She still looks like a little kid…"

Hephaistos could only raise an eyebrow at Freya's comment.

Freya perked up the tips of her mouth as she ran her fingers through her silver hair.

"Before coming here, gods used to fight one another to the death for fun. This is a lot cuter. Not even dangerous."

"Well, yes. That's true. You've known Loki for a long time, right?"

"Very much so, about as long as the two of you."

Hephaistos helped a wobbly Hestia to her feet.

"We're not as close as we once were," said Hephaistos with a weak smile.

"Looks like Loki's taken a liking to the children. Maybe that's why she's changed."

"I hate to say it, but she has that in common with me."

"Ohh? Didn't you say 'I don't look at the children like that' not too

long ago? Did that new boy, Bell, change that?"

"Hee-hee, maybe so. He's a really good boy. He's wasted on me."

"If I remember right, he's a white-haired, red-eyed human boy, yes? You came and told me right after you started your *Familia*. I was shocked, really."

Freya's ears twitched as she heard the news.

She set her empty glass on the table and swished her hair.

"I bid you Farewell."

"What, already? Do you have somewhere to be, Freya?"

"I got the information I came here for, so there's no point in staying."

"… You didn't ask anyone anything today?"

Freya and Hephaistos had been together since the start of the Celebration. Hephaistos was confused about her friend's sudden departure and tilted her head.

Freya ignored her and instead cast her eyes on Hestia. Her smile was still there but was now somewhat different from before.

Hestia blinked a few times as Freya's aura changed.

"… And I've gotten bored of all the men here."

Don't you dare!!!!

"……"

"……"

She gave a nod as a simple good-bye and disappeared into the crowd.

The remaining goddesses watched her leave before looking at one another. They exchanged an awkward laugh and a shrug.

"Freya really is the Goddess of Beauty… no respect."

"She's in control of love and desire. Someone's bound to want her help…"

"She has a *Familia*. She just doesn't see what is right under her nose. To think she might become a rival… makes me appreciate the children that much more!"

"She could recruit new members just by smiling…"

Hephaistos let out a deep breath and scratched the bandage covering her right eye.

It was a habit she'd picked up. Whenever she wasn't satisfied or couldn't accept something, her hand just went there on its own.

Hestia let out a small "hmm" through her nose, watching Hephaistos closely.

"Anyway, what are you going to do now? I'm going to walk around, talk to a few more people. Are you going home?"

A light snapped on in Hestia's brain. Her shoulders jumped when she realized she had almost forgotten something very important.

"You could stick around for a while? Have a drink or two?"

"Um… yeah… well…"

Hephaistos's expression changed when she saw Hestia start fidgeting.

She'd seen that many times before.

Ignoring the blast of suspicion bursting out from under Hephaistos's flaming red hair, Hestia made up her mind. She cleared her throat.

"I… um, have a favor to ask you."

"……"

Hephaistos's left eye narrowed, sharp as a dagger.

The carefree Hephaistos was gone in an instant. She was engulfed in a much more serious aura.

It was the same one she'd had when flat-out stating that she wouldn't be lending any money.

"You ask now, after what you said earlier? Think back—what did you say?"

"Umm… What was it again?"

" 'I don't need to eat from anyone else's plate' ring a bell?"

Hestia smiled and nodded, not arguing the point. She had said that, after all.

Hephaistos looked at her as though she had just climbed out of a toilet. While Hestia wanted to take back her earlier statement, she clenched her jaw and waited out the awkward silence.

This was the reason Hestia had come to the Celebration in the first place. She might lose a friend for it, but she had to try.

"… Okay, I'll play your game. What. Is. Your. Request?"

Hephaistos stared down at the short goddess, her red hair and eye on the verge of bursting into flames.

Hephaistos was known as the Goddess of the Forge when she resided in Tenkai, the upper world. The *Familia* she created on Gekai didn't rely on the income of adventurers in Orario to survive.

Even still, there was not a single adventurer in Orario who didn't know the name *Hephaistos*.

She had created a brand.

Her *Familia* was home to many specialists capable of creating weapons so strong that even a hundred others wouldn't measure up. These smiths forged high-quality weapons known around the world.

Hestia had come here today to directly ask the president of *Hephaistos Familia* for a favor. She took a deep breath and said in the strongest voice she could muster:

"I would like you to make a weapon for Bell… a member of my *Familia*."

Chapter 5
THE GODDESS'S PRANK

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Chapter 5

THE G♥DDESS'S PRANK

"Byooua!"

"!"

Those claws missed by a mile. Just watched them go by my face.

I'm back in the bluish halls of the dungeon. This goblin is so loud, the echoes of his cries tell me where he is even when I'm not looking.

I can see it in his eyes. He's frustrated. He's coming back for more. One, miss, two, miss, three, also a swing and a miss.

Left, right… diagonal!

Here comes a sideswipe. Step back and he hits nothing but air.

As long as I keep my eyes open and this floor has wide hallways that make sense, I can keep dodging like this all day. It is surprisingly humid in here, though. I'm already soaked with sweat.

This goblin sure is a tenacious little guy. He just keeps coming after me, flailing his stubby little arms. I keep my own arms up and out of the way, let the rest of my body twist to dodge his attacks. My leg might not be at 100 percent just yet, but I'm more than capable of dancing with him.

"Gigiiiin… Jya!!!!"

"!"

I think I just saw something. Not the goblin—he's shaking his fist in frustration.

Above!

There is a shadow stuck to the wall right there!

"Gega!"

It jumps in front of the light specks, casting a large shadow. Incoming!

"Naaaah!"

I roll backward just in time to avoid its surprise attack. My eyes are still a bit hazy, too much blood to the head… Looks like four legs, some kind of lizard, maybe?

Scaly brown skin, a tongue flicking in and out of its mouth—yep, this

is a lizard. Including its tail, it might be as long as I am tall.

A Dungeon Lizard.

It shows up on lower Levels Two though Four, same class as goblins and kobolds.

"—ha!"

The moment I was waiting for! The goblin can wait. I have to finish off this one first.

It has sucker disks under its feet. It'll climb back up the wall to line up another attack if I don't take it out now. If it gets away… Ah, what a pain.

The goblin jumps in for another attack. Sidestep. I'll take care of you in a moment. I've got to repay this lizard for his sneak attack.

Blast off!

"YAAHHH!!!"

"Guge—?!"

The Dungeon Lizard must have sensed my blade. It made straight for the wall. However, I'm faster.

Dagger to the other hand, jump forward, there! I plunge my blade deep into the lizard's back.

It howls in pain, limbs thrashing. Did I hit the magic stone shard…? Hee-hee, looks like I just made a liz-kabob. In its last gasp, it bends backward, trying to bite my face. Not even close. A second later it falls limp on the floor. Its body is still here; magic shard is still okay!

"Gyaiiii!!!!"

Oh yeah, the goblin is still here, too.

Got my dagger out of the Dungeon Lizard's corpse, good defensive stance… I've got an idea.

I unclip my backpack from my arm and hurl it straight at the incoming goblin.

"?!"

Projectile baggage, not bad. Wide-eyed goblin never saw it coming.

Time slows as I watch my bag slice through the air and slam into the goblin's face.

"Hege!"

The sound of impact booms through the hallway. The goblin flies backward like a bug flicked off a shoulder.

My Strength has reached the point that I'm able to not only carry heavier drop items through the Dungeon but can also use the backpack itself as a weapon against lower-tier monsters.

He's still rolling like a snowball, clutching my bag.

"… guuuu."

Snap! Ouch, that crack sounds like it hurt… He's stopped rolling, but his body is convulsing… and now he's not moving anymore.

Don't let down your guard just yet, Bell… Yep, it's dead. Take a deep breath, relax those shoulders. Battle is over for now.

Flicking the lizard blood off my dagger, I slide it back into its sheath.

"… All right."

Stretch out the arms and legs a bit. The knee's not too bad.

I finally have my full range of motion back; still stings a bit, though. I don't want to test it more than I have to.

I'm glad.

This means I'm stronger, right?

I mean, I'm in the lower fourth. Cleared out the monsters in this area, too. That last battle went very well, now that I think about it.

I didn't have any trouble dispatching the Dungeon Lizard and the goblin, even though it was two on one. I even favored my good leg and still dodged all of their attacks with ease.

That alone proves it; I'm getting stronger. Just as the goddess said, I'm improving very fast.

… But am I catching up to Ms. Wallenstein?

From the bottom of my soul, I really hope so.

She's Level Five, but I have no idea beyond that just how strong she is. There is a flame burning within me that keeps me going. It tells me I can get there.

That should be enough for today, though. I need to get the magic stones from the Dungeon Lizard and the goblin. I might be attacked on the way home, too, don't forget. I made three trips up to exchange shards for money earlier today. My pack was too heavy to keep going. Time to start number four.

The path from lower Level Four to lower Level One has been engrained in my memory. Lots of twists, turns, and three stairwells sit between the Dungeon entrance and me.

I encounter a few kobolds and goblins on the way there, but they're no big deal. It's got to be evening by now. The sky should be turning orange.

I start seeing other adventurers halfway through lower Level One. There is only one entrance and exit, so I'm used to seeing a few on my way home.

Look at their armor! It's amazing! That elfess, hers is so sleek and poised. And that dwarf, his armor looks like a mobile fortress. Then there's me… in my crappy little "outfit." Daahhhh… I should get through here as quickly as I can. Please don't notice me…

I wonder if the goddess will come back today.

She left to go to a friend's party two days ago. She said she'd be gone for a few days, so I'm not too worried, but still.

I probably miss having her around more than she misses me.

I wonder what she's doing right now…

Ah, almost there.

A long, wide tunnel connects the upper part of the Dungeon with the outside world. Many people call it the Beginning Road. There is a large

hole in the ceiling at the head of the road.

Unfortunately, I have to climb ten meters of a spiral staircase to get out of here. The hole's diameter is about ten meters as well, just one giant tube.

I join countless groups of adventurers as they climb the winding silver staircase. After the last few steps, everything changes. The walls look man-made; even the smell is refreshing.

This is the basement of the white tower, Babel.

The room is like a giant wheel resting on its side, but with no spokes. Seriously, thousands of adventurers could be in here and still have room to breathe.

It's hard to believe I'm standing directly above the most dangerous place in the world. The monsters are right below me. Maybe that's why it looks like a giant shrine. If someone told me this place was supposed to be used as an altar in a ceremony to honor the gods, I'd believe it.

The walls are a mix of blue and white. They're dotted with stone plaques inscribed with names. Probably adventurers from a time gone by.

There are many long, thick pillars scattered all around. I can't count them all, too many. A grand mural covers the ceiling of the chamber from end to end. It is the most subtle and soothing picture of the sky I have ever seen.

I'm perfectly safe from this point on. I can feel adrenaline leaving my body. Unfortunately, it was keeping the pain from my injuries at bay… Gonna be sore tonight…

… Huh? What's that?

All the adventurers and supporters are clearing a path… What's behind them?

Isn't that a cargo box…? It's very large; several people could fit inside. It's on wheels with a long handle wrapping around the front. There's another one! A whole row of them!

Aren't they used when groups go on "expeditions" to the lower floors?

I suppose they would be handy to carry food and supplies. It takes a long time to come back up.

Did that one just move?!? I heard it!

The adrenaline's coming back…

Okay, calm down. Let's watch it, see if I'm just hearing things…

It moved again! Something inside is alive and trying to get out. Should I go take a peek?

Wait… What if…?

The cargo box looks more like a cage. Now why would there be a moving cage? Unless…

There's a monster inside it?

I just hear a soft growl coming from within the box. It has to be a

monster.

Is it okay for a monster to be… here?!?!

The Guild manages this tower. They control the lid of the Dungeon. In ancient times, the monsters would emerge almost every day—I'm sure that caused a lot of problems! So this tower was built to keep them down there. It's our guard tower.

Nowadays, adventurers have Falna, so we go and hunt them. On the other hand, they can still come at us in waves. I've heard that the Guild is very strict about the tower, their base. They do many things to keep us safe.

So they would never allow anyone to bring a monster out of the Dungeon.

Monsters should not be in here, ever.

Here comes another cargo box, coming up the spiral stairs! This is insane! What do I do? What do we do?

"They doing that again this year?"

"Monsterphilia, yep."

"Is there a point to it? I'm surprised people haven't gotten bored."

"Yearly freak show… Pointless."

"*Ganesha Familia* puts a lot into it. Even the Guild goes along with this, every single year."

"Sounds just like Ganesha, doesn't it?"

All these voices in the crowd. They're not frightened… they're bored?

Monsterphilia…

So the monsters that are being pulled up here one after another have something to do with this fair?

All of the people pulling the cargo boxes are wearing an emblem with an elephant's head. Looks like I'm not the only one interested—everyone's eyes are on them.

Wait a minute… Isn't that Eina?

Mid-length brown hair, pointy ears…

Yep, that's my boss standing over there. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

She looks really serious. Ah, another Guild worker. I guess they're talking about where these monsters need to go?

She must be on the job.

She's even got paperwork in her hand. I'd better leave her alone.

If that guy I overheard was right, the Guild is in charge of these cargo boxes.

The fact that Guild workers like Eina are here proves that something is going on, but it's under control.

There are so many things I want to ask her, but I'll wait for another chance.

She'll be angry at me if I get in the way. Don't really want to ask

anyone else around here, though… They'll just laugh at me for not knowing.

I should just go. I can get answers later.

Besides, I probably smell horrible. My clothes are still soaked with sweat.

With one last glance in Eina's direction, I go up the stair and to the showers.

"Thank you for your hard work today."

A Guild receptionist saw me off as I left.

After my shower, I made the trip to Guild headquarters to exchange my magic stones and drop items for money.

I knew Eina wasn't there, so I got in and out as fast as I could.

"The sun is already going down…"

Golds and reds fill the evening sky.

From the front, headquarters really looks a lot like the basement of Babel Tower, now that I think about it. One step out the door and the noise of Main Street is already surrounding me.

Going around the monument on the front lawn, I pass through the front gate and into the throng of people already outside. There's a good mix of races out on Main Street tonight.

Actually, there are eight Main Streets in Orario. Every one of them starts at Babel and stretches all the way out to the city wall. I like to think of the city as a big cake with eight slices.

Each Main Street is named for the direction it goes from Babel Tower, like North Main or Southeast Main. The goddess and I live under a church between Northwest Main and West Main. The Benevolent Mistress, where Syr works, is located on West Main. The Guild headquarters is here, too, so most people on this street are adventurers.

Adventurers and their supporters need the Guild for many things like paperwork, the Exchange, etc. I'm in here a few times a day, everyone else at least once a day, I'm sure. Out of all the Main Streets, West Main has by far the most adventurers.

Therefore, there's a lot of competition for shops and bars to get a spot on this street. Adventurers need supplies and a good place to relax, and they have money. This street is lined with weapon shops, armor shops, item stores, and lots of bars. The places off of Main Street are a little shady, but you never know what you'll find in one of them. There are a few hotels here and there as well.

Adventurers are going in and out of shops all over the place. I've got some time to kill, let's see what's around. The goddess isn't home, so no rush.

"Hm? Oh, if it isn't Bell?"

“Ah! It’s nice to see you again!”

A person walking toward me on the stone road called out.

Tall with a strong chin and a high nose, the young man has the look of royalty. His presence feels different from a human or demi-human, even in a plain gray robe.

His absolute perfection sets him apart from everyone else on the street. Anyone can tell immediately he’s a god. He’s the only god I know personally—other than Hestia, of course. His name is Miaha. I’d better bow and say hello properly.

“Hello, Miaha. Are you out shopping?”

“Yeah, picking up a few things for dinner myself today. What are you up to?”

“I’m just looking around… I don’t have any money, so I’m window-shopping.”

“Ha-hamm, I can relate. Everyone in a small *Familia* has to work hard, even the god.”

He smiles at me from above two large paper bags, one in each hand. His smile is very soothing; he’s an all-around cheerful god. Add in his ocean-blue hair, and he’s an attractive man. I have to admit it.

The gods all look different—some very young, while some look almost middle-aged—but one thing they all have in common is an absolutely perfect face. A lot of us are jealous of them because of it; include me, just a little.

His wide smile is infectious, just like Hestia’s. Wait! Maybe he knows something about her.

“Can I ask you a question, Miaha? Do you know where Hestia is right now? She went to a friend’s party two days ago, and she still hasn’t come home.”

“Hestia… hmmm. No, I’m sorry. I haven’t seen her, either. I don’t think I can be of much help.”

“It’s okay. Please don’t worry about it.”

A god apologized… to me? And he lowered his head! No no no. Head down, now!

“Two days ago… That’s most likely Ganesha’s Celebration. Unfortunately, I couldn’t attend the event myself. If I had, I might have more to tell.”

“Miaha, were you not invited to attend?”

“Ah, no. I got an invitation. But my *Familia* is struggling for money at the moment. I can’t leave them at this stressful time, it wouldn’t be right. I was hard at work creating a new compound. No time to go to a drinking party anyway.”

I’ll be frank when I say his *Familia* is a lot like mine, struggling to make ends meet.

That’s half the reason I know Miaha—we are both in bottom-of-the-barrel *Familias*.

“Bell, I’d like you to have these. It’s a sample of what I was working on the other night.”

“Are you sure?!”

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Transferring both bags to one arm, he casually reaches into the fold of his robe and takes out two small test tubes filled with a dark blue liquid and hands them to me like it was nothing. I take them almost as a reflex.

The syrupy potion slowly swishes around in the vial. Looks like deep ocean molasses.

"Miaha, are you sure this is okay?"

"What's wrong with giving a neighbor a cup of sugar? It's no problem."

He ignores my bewilderment and lets out a hearty laugh.

He pats my shoulder with his free hand and steps to the side.

"Well, I hope to be seeing you at my *Familia*'s shop again real soon, Bell."

He waves one more time before turning around and continuing on his way.

Did that really just happen? I'm so happy! There he goes, into the crowd. I bow one more time as a send-off.

These potions recover physical strength. I'm sure they'll come in handy. Now where to put them…? Ah! My leg holster would be good. There we go.

Miaha's *Familia* makes items like this. Their store is very small, but they are a very specialized group.

I don't know too much about what goes on behind the scenes, but I know that each *Familia* in this business has its own recipe. They constantly look for new ways to get an edge on the competition. I like *Miaha Familia*'s potions. I go there when I have enough money to pick one up.

His *Familia* is a good example, but there are many *Familias* doing the same thing with other items and weapons.

Some *Familias* produce items, and some are filled with smiths who make armor and weapons. I even heard about one that brings in fresh fish from the ocean. At first, I thought that *Familias* were just groups of adventurers, but that's not always the case.

Gods need to make a living. How they do it is completely up to them.

The god chooses exactly what their *Familia* is going to do. That decision in turn affects the market they go into. "Gekai's food is delicious, so I'll open a restaurant!" Kind of like that. They could even start their own country. They can do almost anything.

But competition among members within a *Familia* and from other *Familias* is also very strong. Fights tend to break out. Without some strong adventurers to keep the peace, a *Familia* can fall apart. It might not even get off the ground. *Familias* need strong leaders, and adventurers fill that role pretty well.

Becoming an adventurer was perfect for me because it's a good way

to make money. Okay, okay, I had a few more romantic reasons for wanting to be one, too. But I'm not trained to do anything else.

Here I am, walking to the left down Main Street, thinking about how I'd look working in one of these shops… Ha-ha, don't think so.

"……"

Getting close to the good weapon shops now. There are some really strong-looking adventurers around today. Ah! There it is!

The weapons shop in front of me is twice the size of its neighbors.

Not only that, it's painted to look like an inferno. It's impossible to miss this place.

There is a strange-looking sign above some really thick doors. "Ηφαιστος"

I can't read those characters, but I know their meaning. It's the logo used by a world-famous *Familia* of smiths.

I don't think anyone's watching me… Let's have a look-see at their display window.

One sheet of clear glass is between me and all sorts of sharp, shiny objects. Oh yeah, they make weapons, good ones. That one's got an emerald green blade! Those twin swords look awesome! The reach on that buster sword… it's huge! There's even a rapier inlaid with gold plating!

Ohhhhh, there it is!

This display is genius. The tip of the dagger's white blade is thrust into the center of a treasure chest–like box. Magic stone lamps light it up from the top down. It's like that dagger itself is the treasure, and I just found it. Its finely honed edge looks just as potent as the claw it was forged from. Not only is the blade a thing of beauty, it's just as powerful as the longer blades on display.

That's a lot of zeros on the price tag…

I would look so awesome with this…

Kind of sad to admit, but I've been coming by this window on my way home for a while now. Just to look at this work of art.

It's a top-class weapon used by the average adventurer.

I know, I'm a dirt-poor adventurer using a weapon purchased with money borrowed from the Guild, but I want to touch that one. Just once, just to see how it feels.

… I want it bad.

I'm sure other adventurers would laugh and say, "Yeah, in your dreams!" if I told them I want this dagger.

If I keep trying to catch up to Ms. Wallenstein, maybe the day I can hold this amazing weapon will come.

With that dagger in my hand, I'd be unstoppable. Slash this way, cut that way, monsters dropping like flies.

I've been staring into the glass for so long, I'm surprised it hasn't started melting…

“How long do you plan on doing that?”

“……”

While Bell was drooling over a weapon on display on the first floor of the weapons shop, a very irritated red-haired goddess was sitting behind a desk on the third floor above him.

Hephaistos, dressed in her *Familia*’s uniform, had had enough. Her frustration poured into every syllable of her words.

The source of her annoyance was on the other side of her desk, a goddess on her hands and knees with her face pressed onto the floor. It was none other than Hestia.

They were on the third floor of *Hephaistos Familia*’s main store located on Northwest Main.

The store was the base of operations for her *Familia*’s world-famous brand. The third floor was devoted to management and currently packed with tension.

“You realize I’m very busy?”

“……”

“You may be very quiet, but I can’t concentrate on paperwork with you there. Don’t you get it?”

“……”

“Hestia?”

“……”

“… haa…”

Hephaistos could only sigh at the lump of a goddess on the floor, at her friend who had not moved from that position.

For an entire day.

That’s how long Hestia had kept her head down, plastered to the floorboards.

On the night of the Celebration, Hestia had asked her to have her *Familia* make a weapon for one of her members. Hephaistos dismissed it immediately.

Even though she didn’t brag about it, the smiths of *Hephaistos Familia* were known as the best in the business. She had a reputation to uphold. Run-of-the-mill adventurers and *Familias* didn’t have the resources to buy her weapons.

To have her smiths make a weapon just for a friend was out of the question. To request her smiths’ sweat and blood to produce anything under those terms would be an abuse of power. Completely taboo.

Hephaistos had told Hestia many times, and as directly as possible, to come back with some money if she wanted to make a custom order.

However, Hestia hadn’t given up and kept on asking. Every time she asked, her head bowed lower and lower. She’d been persistent since the start of the Celebration, and Hephaistos was at her limit.

Hestia showed no signs of giving up, or of even raising her head.

Hephaistos had told her to do whatever she wanted and gone back to her *Familia*'s home base. She'd been planning to ignore Hestia until she gave up. Hestia was bound to get hungry and go home at some point.

That was two days ago.

Hestia was still pleading.

Why is she doing this…?

Hephaistos looked down on her with a questioning eye.

She couldn't understand what drove Hestia to keep that pose, even while Hephaistos was trying to sleep. It was quite a shock when she woke up. She nearly fell out of her bed.

She'd asked for many things before, but something was different this time.

Hestia's strong will, her obsession, was shining through.

"Just what is that pose? You've been doing it since yesterday."

"… *Dogeza*."

"Do-ge-za?"

"Také told me this pose has the power to make people forgive whatever you have done and grant any request."

"Také…?"

"Takemikazuchi…"

"Aaa…," said Hephaistos as the face of the god in question floated into her mind. She knew that if Hestia was taking his advice, this could be a real pain.

*I can't take this anymore…*Hephaistos sighed. She couldn't focus on her paperwork. So, she set her feather pen on the side of her desk and piled up the papers that still needed her signature.

The sun cast long, golden shadows across the room. Night was almost upon them.

Hephaistos glanced outside before straightening her always perfect posture. Taking a deep breath, she cast her gaze onto the back of Hestia's head.

"… Hestia, tell me. Why are you going this far?"

Her finger lightly scratched her eye patch as she posed her question.

"… Because I want to help him!"

Hestia didn't look up, only raised her voice loud enough to be clearly understood.

"He's changing, and quickly. He—Bell has a goal, and he's chosen the hardest path to follow. It's a dangerous path, that's why I want to help! I want to give him the strength he needs! A weapon that will clear a path for him!"

Hestia kept talking with her face to the floor, never looking up.

A god asking another god for help. Hestia had to reveal her true intentions. It was impossible to hide anything from a god. She bared her entire being in an attempt to persuade Hephaistos to change her mind.

"He is always helping me! I feel like I am living off his hard work! I'm his goddess, but I haven't done anything godlike for him!"

Hestia's whole body tensed as she squeezed out her next words:

"… I hate being useless…"

Her voice was weak, but it was enough to reach Hephaistos's ears.

At that moment, the truth in Hestia's words convinced her to act.

"… All right. A weapon shall be made for this… boy."

Hestia's eyes shot open as her head popped up. Hephaistos shrugged.

"If I didn't say yes, you'd never move."

"… Yes. Thank you, Hephaistos!"

Hestia tried to jump to her feet, but after spending a day facedown on the floor, her limbs weren't ready. She fell back to her knees, an innocent smile on her face. Hephaistos sighed again, but this time it was lighthearted.

She knew she was being too nice to her, but Hephaistos saw a change in Hestia. She felt no animosity helping her like this.

At least Hestia wasn't shut up in a room in her shop anymore. Thinking of the difference between those days and now made her smile despite herself.

"But let me say this: You will pay back every single val, understood? I don't care if it takes one hundred years, you will repay me."

That didn't mean she was going to give the weapon to her for free.

Even though Hestia was taking advantage of her own resources to get what she wanted, the world-famous *Hephaistos Familia* was taking action. Hestia had to work for it.

However, Hestia had shown resolve. Hephaistos nodded to herself as she stood up from her chair, walked over to the still-kneeling Hestia, and softly poked her nose.

"I know, I know. I can do it if I try. And I'll prove to you that my feelings for Bell are the real thing!"

"Ha-ha, I'm looking forward to it."

Hephaistos was only half listening to Hestia's bold words as she walked over to a shelf at the other side of the room. Mostly used for decoration, the shelf held a line of brand-new short hammers of varying colors.

"What does he use?"

"Umm… He uses a knife…"

Hephaistos muttered, "Is that right," under her breath as she picked up a vermilion hammer from the display shelf.

The hammer had no useless decorations or markings—it was designed to be used, not seen. Hephaistos slid the tool into a pouch strapped around her waist.

Next, she walked farther down the shelf to a clear crystal case and opened the lid. The case contained a mix of assorted metals and alloys. She selected one that sparkled a light silver hue, mythril.

Lighter and stronger than iron, mythril was also far more malleable and easier to work with.

It was the best metal for a female blacksmith's thin arms, with no special abilities, to shape.

"H-Hephaistos? Are you going to make it yourself?"

"Yes, of course. That should be obvious. This has nothing to do with my *Familia*. It's a private request between us. I can't let them get involved."

This was the main store of her *Familia*'s business, but it was equipped with a rather small forge and workshop on the first floor. Hephaistos was planning to go there to make the weapon herself.

She shot Hestia a look with her good eye as if to say, "You have a problem with that?"

Hestia shook her head and arms, indicating, "Not one." Her face beamed with youthful energy.

"Why would I have a reason to complain? Bell will get a weapon made by the most famous blacksmith in all of Tenkai! In fact, I couldn't ask for more!"

"Have you forgotten? This isn't Tenkai, I can't use my 'power' here."

The gods and goddesses had a mutual agreement. All of them were forbidden to use Arkanam while on Gekai.

Hephaistos had made hundreds of weapons and pieces of armor for gods while living in Tenkai. But down here, the Goddess of the Forge was on par with an unblessed child, just a human in terms of strength.

"You think I care? I'm so happy you're doing this!"

"……"

She didn't doubt Hephaistos's skill. Accepting her work with no conditions still made Hephaistos uneasy. It was written all over her face.

What bothered her most was that she didn't care.

"… You will be lending me a hand. I'm not going to let you just sit around."

"You can count on me!"

Hiding a small smile with her fingers, Hephaistos turned to leave.

Hestia followed her, bouncing up and down like an excited puppy.

Got to follow the customer's wishes, don't I?

Hephaistos was changing her mind-set from the leader of the *Familia* to that of a craftsman.

The blade that Hestia desired…

A blade that would clear the path for an adventurer.

A blade worthy of the name "Hephaistos."

… Easier said than done…

Hephaistos dug through her memory to recall as much information about the boy as she could.

Bell Cranell. Human. A barely fourteen-year-old boy.

He was the only member of *Hestia Familia*. He'd received his Falna

little more than two weeks ago.

Basically, he was a greenhorn as far as adventurers were concerned.

A high-quality blade useable by the most inexperienced of adventurers…

This was a very difficult problem.

Adventurers who tried to use too strong of a blade suffered for it. Their growth stopped as they tried to master the weapon. They couldn't wield it in battle. To put it simply, they were not ready.

On the other hand, if she made a poor blade, it would damage the name "Hephaistos."

Hephaistos considered herself a smith before a god. She took a lot of pride in everything she made. She wouldn't allow herself to produce anything less than the best. It was her policy.

Anything worth making was worth making well. She decided to put her heart and soul into making the perfect blade.

She was between a rock and a hard place.

Well… how shall we do this?

She called on the knowledge that came from making countless other pieces.

It may be for a friend, but this order is a real pain in the ass…

Hestia looked on with bubbly eyes as Hephaistos went to work, cursing the whole thing.

The goddess left three days ago. She's still not back.

I felt a little lonely eating breakfast in an empty room this morning. Going back to the Dungeon again today.

I have a job to do; it doesn't matter if she's here or not. Besides, I want to surprise her with a big pile of loot when she gets back. "Hey! Look how much I earned while you were away!" I can see her face now… Got to get the loot first, though. Quick check in the mirror; everything looks in order.

My leg holster has the two potions I got last night. My dagger is strapped to my lower back. Slip the backpack on over my armor, and I'm ready. Come on, Bell, you can do this!

"I'm heading out."

There's no one to hear me, but I feel like I should say good-bye anyway. Here I go.

My leg's back to normal. Today's the day I go back to the lower fifth.

A few days ago, I got carried away and went down there. It didn't turn out so well. I ran away crying, literally. It'll be different this time. I don't know exactly how much, but my status is much higher now. Well, just to be safe, maybe I should talk with Eina before going into the Dungeon today…

Before I know it, I've climbed out of the hidden room under the church and walked my usual path through the ruins. I love how morning feels, so fresh and ready. Ah, already on West Main. Time is flying this morning.

Should loosen up a bit before getting to the Dungeon… A morning jog sounds good. This morning looks a lot like the morning I met Syr. The sun is in the same place, people are going about their business. I can run faster than this—speed up, man, speed up.

Yep, there're the same two animal people talking on the corner. Someone's setting up the terrace. The girl who was in the second-floor window of that shop isn't here today, though.

"Oi! Wait up nya, white-head kid!"

White-head kid…? I haven't heard "kid" since… Where did that voice come from?

Isn't that The Benevolent Mistress? And that's the catgirl waitress. Running over, her thin tail swishing, waving her arms like a maniac…

… Behind her, isn't that the elfess who works there, too?

I remember the voice that called me "kid" all too well. It was that or "tomato boy," and other things I'd rather not think about.

Is she really talking to me…? I returned Syr's basket on my way home last night…

I point at myself and mouth, "Me?" The catgirl is still coming this way at full speed, nodding.

"Good morning, nya! Sorry to call nyou out like that, nya!"

"Ah, um, morning… Can I help you…?"

She's bowing to me. Okay, I can do that, too…

That's a very rehearsed bow, must be for work. She's about to say something.

"Got a favor to ask nyou. Here, nya!"

"?"

"Syr is nyour friend, white-head kid. So I want nyou to give this to her, nya!"

It's a cloth coin purse with a metal clasp. I've seen this style before. It's popular.

There's an unfamiliar emblem engraved on the clasp, and I can tell right away it was made by one of the *Familias*. The purse itself is purple, kind of cute and girlie.

Yeah, it's cute and all, but I don't understand…

Give this to Syr? What's going on?

"Ahnya. You are not being clear. Mr. Cranell is confused."

Ah, the elfess. She was the one on the terrace this morning. Maybe she can tell me what's up…

… Hang on, she said, "Mr. Cranell"! She remembered me. Me!

"Lyu, nyou're stupid! Syr forgot her wallet, playing hooky to go to Monsterphilia, nya. She nyeeds it, so I'm asking him to take it to her.

Nyou knew that, right, white-head kid?"

"That is how it is. I apologize for the confusion."

"Ah, no, I got it now. That's what's going on."

The elfess named Lyu ignores her coworker's pouting face and gives me a short, repentant bow. I lower my head, too; she sorted it all out for me.

The catgirl looks dejected, like she was left out in the cold. Her tail hangs limp, and she looks at the ground. I hear a small "hm" come from her nose. Is she angry at me?

"Please pay her no mind. Are you sure it is okay to accept our request? Ahnya, the other employees and I are too busy preparing to go after Syr ourselves. I know we are interrupting your plans for today…"

"It's not that big of a deal, but is it true Syr is skipping out on work?"

"Ahnya did not choose her words well. Syr is not playing hooky. Her situation is different because she doesn't reside at our establishment like we do."

I knew Syr wouldn't skip work. She seemed to really enjoy it. Sounds like she has a day off or something. She doesn't live at the bar, which means that she doesn't need to work every day like these two. I bet that dwarfess, Mama Mia, had to give permission, though.

So she's bound to have a day off here and there, right?

And it sounds like she went to some kind of festival…

"Monsterphilia…?"

"Yes. She went to see the opening events today."

I heard those words in the basement of Babel Tower.

"Do you not know? All residents of Orario know about this event."

"Actually, I haven't lived here very long… Could you tell me about it?"

"—Nyay! Me will tell nyou about it, nya!"

As soon as I asked, the catgirl suddenly jumped in between us. She looked so depressed two seconds ago… Where did this energy come from? She's talking really fast, too!

"Monsterphilia is an event put on once a year by *Ganesha Familia*, nya! We fill the stadium for a day and tame the monsters, nya!"

"Huh?… T-tame?!"

What the hell is she talking about?!?

Taming the monsters? Keeping those vicious beasts as pets?!?

"It's nyot really that strange, nya? Nyou're an adventurer, nya, aren't cha, white head? Nyou have seen when a slain monster wakes up with a look in its eyes. It wants to be our friend, nya!"

"Uh… no. I can't say I have…"

Should I believe her? Can I? I must look confused, because Lyu speaks up again.

"Taming has been recognized as a skill. I am being brief, but a person proves him- or herself more powerful than a monster. In turn,

the monster obeys that person's commands."

"The monster obeys their commands."… Sounds like I'm in another world.

"The monsters in the Dungeon have bad tempers, nya! So usually monsters already above ground are tamed. But *Ganesha Familia*'s tamers are good! They break the Dungeon-born monsters, too, nya!"

Ganesha Familia… I've heard that name before. They are probably the most influential *Familia* in Orario. I've heard there is a ton of members, too.

"So, basically these tamers fight a monster until it submits. And people watch?"

"That's right, nya! Like a really big circus!"

Except much more dangerous… Yeah, I got it.

"We wanted to go, too, nya! But Mommy Mia said nyo nyo… Syr said she'd buy us syomething, but she forgot her wallet, nya! She smiled and waved, but nyo money! Careless girl, nya!"

"Ahnya, I don't believe you are correct…"

Ehh, I got this figured out. Syr can't buy souvenirs, or anything else, without her wallet. I owe her, so it's the least I can do to take this to her.

"I believe that the area around the stadium on East Main will be very crowded. If you head in that direction, you should find the stadium easily."

"Syr just left, nya! Nyou can catch up!"

"Sure thing."

My heavy backpack would get in the way, so I ask them to keep it at The Benevolent Mistress. I can swing by later to pick it up.

Clutching Syr's wallet in hand, I make my way toward Babel Tower. I'll need to go beyond it, but it should be a straight shot from here.

Monsterphilia… I wonder what it's like…

Maybe I should check it out later?

East Main Street was alive with the songs and voices of the citizens of Orario.

It was now nine o'clock in the morning. While most adventurers were already prowling the Dungeon, throngs of townspeople were gathering on the streets.

A line of food stalls ran down the middle of the street, another two lines along the sides. Sounds and smells of their various confections spread out over an ocean of humanity. The street itself was decorated with long ribbons and vibrant flowers. Flags of many colors flew in the morning breeze. Some of them had the silhouette of particularly vicious monsters printed on them. The others had an elephant's head, the

emblem of *Ganesha Familia*.

A young animal boy, his face red with excitement, pulled his mother's arm as they plunged into the crowd. The sun itself seemed to be celebrating the day, its bright yellow beams lighting up the sky.

East Main had been completely transformed by the fair.

"……"

The line of fairgoers ran from the east gate all the way up to the stadium itself. A pair of silver eyes watched them inch along from above the street.

From the second floor of a café, to be exact.

The café had a wooden interior and a very laid-back atmosphere. One woman was sitting at a table next to a glass window facing the street. She was wearing a navy blue cloak to prevent her face, and snowy-white skin, from being seen.

However, one layer of cloth was not enough to contain this person's beauty.

Even though her face was well hidden under a hood, every set of eyes in the café was trained on her. Whenever she would trace the lip of her cup with her delicate fingers or her elegant chin peeked out from under her hood for a moment, everyone around her held their breath. Many people who happened to see her stopped and stared.

All of them were fascinated by someone doing almost nothing. Freya, the Goddess of Beauty, ignored them and kept her eyes on the street below.

"……"

She was watching the many people of Gekai, the children.

Humans, animal people, dwarves, elves. A few adventurers were sprinkled in among the colors of these different races.

Freya thoroughly scanned them with her sharp eyes.

Creaks in the wooden floor announced the arrival of a few customers.

Freya stopped the examination and turned to great the newcomers.

"Yo! Sorry to keep ya waitin'!"

"Not at all. I just got here myself."

Freya smiled under her hood at the person waving at her from the head of the stairwell.

The newcomer's hair was not the bright flame of Hephaistos's, but a more subdued shade of red, the hue of an evening sky. It was tied back into a small ponytail. Her shirt and pants were worn out and faded. If Freya had not known her, she might have thought this person was male.

Fighting back a yawn and with tears in her eyes, Loki smiled back at the cloaked figure.

"Haven't had breaky yet. Mind if I grab a bite?"

"Do as you please."

Loki pulled up a chair across from Freya and sat down. Freya

continued to smile her usual smile, not reacting to Loki at all. The two of them had an air about them, like friends who had known each other for a very long time.

"I heard you had quite the night after the Celebration. Crawled into a bottle and passed out, did you? Hee-hee-hee, Hestia's something else, isn't she?"

"Where'd ya hear that, boobs for brains?"

"I overheard some of your cute children. They had themselves quite the laugh."

"Those bastards, always havin' a good time without me!"

Freya had invited Loki to this café to talk at nine in the morning.

It had been a few days since the Celebration. The two goddesses were only here because of Freya's request.

"So when are you going to introduce that girl standing behind you?"

"Eh, ya need introducin'?"

"This is the first time for us to meet face-to-face."

Loki had not been alone when she entered the café.

Standing like a guard behind Loki with her sword's sheath clutched in her hand was a young girl with blond hair and golden eyes that even Freya, the Goddess of Beauty, had to notice.

"'K then, this is my Aiz. That 'nough for ya? Aiz, this is a goddess, ya should at least say 'ello."

"… Nice to meet you."

Freya muttered, "Kenki," under her breath as her eyes skimmed over the girl.

Aiz Wallenstein. She was the female swordsman who was responsible for *Loki Familia*'s sudden rise to notoriety, even among the gods. Her name and reputation were known not just in Orario but were spreading around the world. Indeed, she needed no introduction.

A girl with her looks did not usually go into a dangerous profession like adventuring. Someone who didn't know her face would never guess that she had slain countless monsters and trodden on just as many of their corpses.

"Ya can take a seat," said Loki as the girl with a thin, delicate face nodded and pulled out a chair to sit down.

"She is very cute. And also… Yes. I can see why you have taken a liking to this one."

Aiz's golden eyes met Freya's silver ones. Aiz kept her face emotionless as she lowered her head in a polite bow.

Her nickname was perfect in some ways, completely wrong in others. Freya's smile flexed for a moment thinking about it.

"Can I ask why you brought the kenki here with you?"

"Fu-he-he-heee… It's the Fair, yah? What better time for a date with my Aizuu?"

Loki's eyes twinkled, a vulgar smile on her lips.

“Well, that and she’s finally back from an expedition. She’ll be back in the Dungeon in no time. That’s just her.”

“……”

“Someone’s gotta tell ’er to relax, don’ they?”

Loki patted the girl’s head as she spoke. Aiz looked down, deciding not to speak up.

Freya looked at the warmth in Loki’s thin eyes and couldn’t help but remember how she was before coming here. Loki had been quite the troublemaker in Tenkai.

“Well, then, I think it’s about time ya tell me why I’m here.”

“I just wanted to chat. It’s been a while.”

“Lyin’ through yer teeth.”

Loki sent a smirk at Freya, still smiling under her hood. She matched Freya’s tone to the letter. The “old friends” aura was gone.

A waiter was unlucky enough to come to take their order at that very moment. Stuck between two lightning rods, he stood silent and motionless at the head of the table as if he had been chained down.

As for Aiz, she kept her face devoid of emotion and chose to watch quietly from the side.

“I’ll ask ya again, why?”

“I don’t understand. What’s the matter, Loki?”

“Come on, moron.”

Freya turned to the waiter, still motionless at the head of the table, and flashed him a smile. The man’s eyes opened like floodgates, his face turning beet red. He broke out in a cold sweat before quickly turning around and wasting no time leaving the area.

Loki watched him leave for a moment before returning her raptor-like gaze back to Freya.

“Ya been strange recently. Ya claim not to be interested in the Celebration, but poke yer head in at the last minute. Say yer there for information? Ya don’ care about that, ya never have… What are ya scheming?”

“Scheming…? Why do you make it sound so evil?”

“Shut ya mouth.”

Loki followed it with saying that strange things happened when Freya acted like this. She went on to say that if it got in her way, she’d end it herself. Loki didn’t blink, her red eyes adding weight to her words.

Freya didn’t back down, meeting Loki’s eyes with her own. The look on Loki’s face could have killed a serpent, but Freya took it head-on, smiling. Invisible sparks flew; the pressure of their conversation filled the room. The café emptied in no time flat.

Aiz had a front-row seat to the clash of goddesses that seemed to go on forever. Until…

Loki got tired and backed down.

The tension instantly evaporated, and Loki continued in a more relaxed voice: “A man, isn’t it?”

“……”

Freya didn’t answer, just kept smiling.

Loki took it as an affirmation.

She let out a deep, long sigh. She had seen this too many times already.

“So… Ya got an eye for a child already in another *Familia*, I take it?”

All of the gods and goddesses knew about Freya’s “habits” when it came to men.

Once a male on Gekai caught her eye, she made a move. Her beauty was powerful enough to make her target her own. Exactly how many men had fallen under her spell, no one knew.

Loki reasoned that Freya’s target was most likely not in her *Familia*. Therefore, the reason she came to the Celebration in the first place was to figure out whose *Familia* the target was in.

Obviously going after someone already in another *Familia*, to take them away from it, would not go over well. The god of the other *Familia* would not sit by and do nothing. Freya was picking a fight. If the other side was strong, she’d get rejected and wallow in despair until she found her next target. She was being cautious, gathering information before she made her move. That was what Loki was thinking, anyway.

Freya didn’t try to deny Loki’s words.

“Jeez, woman. Is that all ya think about? Ya’ll go after anyone, young or old?”

“How rude. I do have standards.”

“Leaving out all the bumbling idiots on Tenkai you pull fast ones on?”

“They have their uses. I’m quite skilled at getting money out of them.”

Loki cleared her throat. The witch was putting up all of her dirty laundry. Loki raised an eyebrow at her fellow goddess. Freya shrugged, but only just enough for the fabric on her cloak to bend ever so slightly.

Thinking that there was nothing left to be said, Loki put her hands behind her head and leaned back in her chair so much that the front feet came off the floor.

Freya also let her guard down and took a sip from her now-cold cup. They both had an answer, and the mood finally cleared.

A clear, sunny sky spread out from the window beside them. The noises of the street were pouring into the café.

Freya’s navy blue cloak swayed in a light breeze rolling in from an open window.

“And?”

“…?”

“Who’s the guy? What child are ya after now? When’d ya find ’im?”

Loki leaned her head to the side as if to say, “Spill it.”

Now she was interested. Unlike Freya, Loki loved details.

If she didn’t get the goods now, she’d leave.

“……”

“I came all this way, changed my plans. I have the right to know.”

Freya looked away from the goddess giving her demands and cast her gaze back out onto the street.

The hood of Freya’s cloak opened enough for Loki to see her silver eyes go clear, as if she was thinking about something in the past.

“… He’s not that strong. Weak if you compare him to the children in our *Familias*. Easily upset, he starts bawling at the simplest of problems… That kind of child.”

The word “but” was on the tip of her tongue.

“He was beautiful, pure. I’ve never seen anything like him.”

And that was why she’d fallen for him.

She heard a melody that most could not, coming from a flame within him. A soprano.

“I found him by accident. He just happened to walk across my line of vision.”

As she talked, Freya thought about every detail of the second she’d first laid eyes on him. She kept her eyes on the busy street, searching for him. This was how she’d found him last time. Maybe today would be the day.

“It was just like this…”

Early morning, brisk air, fresh sunlight, West Main.

He’d come from the other end of the street—just like right now.

He ran into her line of sight, just like he had that morning.

“……”

Freya stopped breathing.

Her eyes had found a white-haired human boy in light adventurer’s armor.

He jumped between people, jogged for a bit, and then stopped before doing it all again.

The boy was moving toward the stadium. Monsterphilia.

Riding the river of people, he was well on his way to the circular building not too far down the road.

Freya watched him for a moment. A new smile, a scary smile, grew on her lips.

“I apologize. Something has come up.”

“Eh?”

“Let’s do this again soon.”

Loki collapsed to the table in stunned disappointment. Freya was already out of her chair.

She adjusted her cloak as she went down the stairs and out of the building.

Only Loki and Aiz were left in the café.

"What kinda person just leaves ya hangin' like that…?"

Loki stared at the staircase for a moment, her eye twitching.

A small "hmm" escaped her throat as she turned to face the girl one seat away from her.

Aiz had her eyes glued to the window.

"What's up, Aiz? Somethin' wrong?"

"… No."

She went on to say, "It's nothing," but she didn't look away.

Her golden eyes, just like the silver eyes of the goddess before her, saw a familiar white head moving through the crowd to the stadium.

"Here it is."

"Ooooo!"

Hephaistos, still dressed in her work gear, handed Hestia a small case. Hestia let out a squeal of delight. She had bags under her eyes, but her face still beamed with energy.

"Does it meet your expectations?"

"Yes, yes! Very much so! No complaints!"

The hinges of the case squeaked as Hestia opened it to have a look inside.

The case contained a dagger with a black handle and sheath.

The entire weapon was black from top to bottom. It might have looked like a simple blade, but Hephaistos had put her soul into making this weapon… with a little help from Hestia.

Completing Bell's new weapon in just under a day gave Hestia a look of happiness and satisfaction, the likes of which Hephaistos had never seen.

"Ah! Hephaistos, the blade needs a name! Can I give it one?? Let's see, how about something that binds Bell and me together? 'Love Dagger' or something like that?"

"Please, no… This dagger is worth more than that. But this is your blade now…"

Hephaistos suggested "Hestia Knife," but Hestia wasn't too excited by that name.

More like she was embarrassed by it. She blushed and scratched her head. But her level of delight was still as high as ever. Even the long ponytails on each side of her head were full of energy, swishing from side to side.

"I'll say this again: Do not go back on the loan."

"I won't! I won't!"

Hephaistos took her hair out of the tight bun she had made yesterday

and started putting in pins. Hestia's energy was infectious, and she couldn't help but smile and nod at her.

However, Hestia was busy adjusting her clothes, as if she were getting ready to go.

"Leaving already?"

"Yeah, sorry!"

She couldn't just sit here now. Hestia made for the exit.

"You should rest before you go!"

Hestia didn't turn around or respond, just waved her hand as she headed out the door.

She had been waiting in a small room behind *Hephaistos Familia*'s main store. She walked right past it and onto Main Street.

I can't wait to give this to him!

Just thinking about his face the moment she gave him the dagger made her so happy she could die.

First, he would simply smile at her, look at her with respect and admiration, and he would hold her…

Hestia's cheeks puffed up as she thought of how to set up that moment. She was walking down the middle of the road, her face stuck in the same expression, giggling to herself.

She calmed down a bit as she walked farther down Northwest Main. She decided to wait for Bell at home, rather than trying to find him in the city. Of course, she wanted to give it to him as quickly as possible, but she didn't know where he was at the moment.

Probably somewhere in the Dungeon, knowing him.

"Hmm?… Ha-ha-ha, I see…"

She'd had a plan, until she happened to see a poster on the side of a shop. No one showed it to her. It was just there. A triumphant grin grew on her face.

The poster detailed the schedule for Monsterphilia, opening today.

The yearly festival is today! Bell just came to Orario. If he knows about Monsterphilia, that's where he'll be!

Therefore, if she went, too, chances were she could see him there. She was in such a good mood that the idea of searching for Bell in a massive crowd didn't bother her at all.

She'd figured out how he thought. Or so she declared to herself via her new (slightly unfounded) confidence. She knew where she needed to go.

Turning on a heel, she made her way toward East Main.

"Hey! Taxi!"

She flagged down a horse cart that was passing through by waving her small hand.

The young driver neatly pulled right up at Hestia's feet. She climbed into the cart and said, "To East Main, please!" and pointed that way for good measure.

“Ha-ha, loud and clear. Are you by chance going to Monsterphilia, Miss Goddess?”

“Something like that.”

The young man flicked the reins, sending the cart into motion. The sound of wooden wheels hitting the rock pavement bounced in her ears. Her seat shook with each stone.

This was a huge city. Home to the most adventurers and *Familias* in the world, Orario distinguished itself from the rest of the larger cities. Inside a city this large, walking wasn’t the most efficient form of transportation. Horses had been brought in to help transport supplies to businesses around the city as well as assist private citizens.

The term “taxi” was first used by a god trying to flag one of them down. The name stuck and had been used ever since.

“I want to get there as fast as I can. I know it’s crowded today, but can you speed up?”

“Do I look like a man who would refuse the request of a goddess?”

The young man was more than happy to oblige and urged his horse to run faster.

Since the main streets were full of people and food stands, he veered off the main road and went into the backstreets. Sometimes their path was so narrow that the cart barely fit through the gap as they rode toward East Main.

The driver, who couldn’t have been more than five years older than Bell, was very friendly and kept a lively conversation going during the trip. Hestia got into the festival spirit watching all the decorations fly by their cart.

“A-ya-ya. I’m sorry, Goddess. Looks like I can’t go any farther.”

“Hmm?”

They had been making great time, but suddenly the cart came to a halt. East Main was only a block away, but the number of fairgoers had increased to the point that the taxi couldn’t proceed.

The driver lowered his head in apology, but Hestia figured this was close enough and started getting ready to disembark from the cart.

“It’s okay, Mr. Driver. I’ll walk from here.”

“I really do apologize. It may be a little dark, but if you use that side road, you should be able to get to East Main.”

“Thanks! How much do I owe you?”

“It comes to ninety vals.”

Hestia turned her purse inside out and emptied the entire contents into the driver’s hands, her face glowing with excitement.

“Hee-hee. Keep the change! It’s your tip!”

“Um, Goddess, this is exactly ninety vals…”

His words fell on deaf ears as Hestia half danced her way onto the side road he had suggested. He watched her for a moment, a slightly lonely look on his face. Giving up on the tip, he turned his cart around

and set off to find another customer.

The side road was dark and narrow. But unlike the main street, no one was back there, and Hestia moved quickly down the path. She skipped forward, humming a happy tune and cradling the weapon case in her arms.

It was at that moment she realized she wasn't alone.

"Huh? Is that you, Freya?"

"… Hestia?"

Hestia almost ran into a woman covering her entire body with a navy blue cloak at a small intersection. Hestia could tell it was the Goddess of Beauty from a few locks of silver hair sticking out from the neck of the hood and the woman's posture.

"Did you come to watch Monsterphilia, too? Taking a back road like this, you must be in a rush."

"… In a sense, yes. There are many children on the main street, so I'm staying out of sight. Sneaking around back here is the fastest way to get around."

"Ah! Must be difficult being the Goddess of Beauty!"

Everyone who saw Freya had a different reaction, but many tended to stop and stare. She could avoid a lot of hassle by staying out of sight. That meant she couldn't ride a taxi to get around, either. This had to be her only way.

Freya smiled her usual smile. Hestia gave her an affirming nod.

"Oh, Freya, while I've got you here. Have you seen the boy in my *Familia*? I'm looking for him."

"……"

"He's a human with white hair and ruby-red eyes… Kind of looks like a rabbit!"

Hestia mimed out her explanation of Bell, arms becoming rabbit ears. Freya stopped smiling and went silent.

But her smile soon returned, and she told Hestia what she knew.

"Now that you mention it, I have. On East Main, not too long ago."

"Really?!"

"Yes. He was heading toward the stadium. So if you take a left up there, you should be able to avoid the crowd completely."

Accepting her directions without a second thought, Hestia thanked her with her biggest smile yet and set off.

Freya smiled a different kind of grin before continuing on her own path.

Hestia followed the road and turned left. More and more sunlight reached the street as she got closer to East Main.

It wasn't long now. Hestia picked up speed and burst out of the side street and into the throng of people on the main street.

The fairgoers didn't have any time to waste, either.

But in the waves of people, she immediately found Bell's white head

trying and failing to move forward through the crowd.

"Heeey! BELL!!!"

"Huh?"

Is that who I think it is over there…? Oh, wow.

Haven't seen the goddess for days, and suddenly she shows up here, in the middle of this mess?

"Goddess?! What are you doing here?"

"Hey, don't be stupid! I wanted to see you, why else?"

She comes all the way up to me, her ridiculously large boobs leading the way.

That's not really an answer… She's making me a bit nervous.

"Yeah, I wanted to see you, too, but not that. Where have you been…?"

"What a wonderful coincidence, don't you think? I wanted to see you, and here you are! We must have some kind of special connection! Hee-hee-hee!"

She's not listening… at all.

She's gone into her own little world. Where does that leave me?

"G-Goddess, you seem to be in a really good mood. What happened?"

"Hee-hee… You wanna know? The reason why I'm happy…"

"Y-yes?"

I swear she's smiling hard enough to power all the magic stone lamps in Orario… She's also hiding something behind her back. What could that be? Well, I'll just have to wait. She's really drawing this out.

"The truth is…"

I wait for her to continue, but she just stops.

She looks around the fair, taking in the sights and sounds. But I don't think she's really here, in the real world. Now she's staring up at the sky. What is going through her head?

"… Hmm. We're already out here, so I'll tell you later!"

"Ehhhhh?"

"Look forward to something really special!"

My shoulders drop; pretty sure my jaw does, too. What is she trying to do to me? Wait, what? She grabbed my hand?!

My heart skips a beat as she takes my right hand. Her skin, it's so soft… She's pulling!

"Let's have a date, Bell!"

She turns her back and looks over her shoulder with a cute little smile.

"… A date?!"

"Yep, yep! Just look at the city! Everything looks so fun! We'll have a

great time!"

"Sure, but what do you mean, a date?"

"Hee-hee! Let's go, Bell! Let's go!"

I'm blushing like mad; I can feel it in my cheeks. But the goddess looks so happy.

Her silklike fingers clamp down on my hand, and she leads me straight into the crowded street.

The street vendors show no signs of slowing down. They are selling so many things! Meat on a stick; easy to carry, I suppose. Oh! Small souvenirs, key chains, accessories with *Ganesha Familia*'s emblem or a monster on them are in that one! Aren't those… real weapons?? Not the highest grade, but they're very real. Only in Orario…

Fireworks fired off from the stadium dot the sky. I can barely hear them over the noise on the street.

"Wait, Goddess. I have to tell you, I'm in the middle of something!"

"Oh, like what?"

"I was asked to find someone."

"Okay, then, we'll look for them while on our date! I think the phrase is two birds with one stone? Hey! Mister! Two of those crepes, please!"

"Goddess?!"

She brushes me off again… I'm in trouble now.

I can't go back to The Benevolent Mistress without getting Syr's wallet to her and say it was because I was on a *date*! Is this a date…? Anyway, if those ladies find out, they would hate me for sure!

And then there's…

The goddess. I can't take my eyes off her.

My hand won't relax, damp with sweat. That's nothing compared with all these new looks from the goddess.

It is strange to think, but she's acting the age she looks, going from vendor to vendor, her eyes sparkling as she points to a pastry or clothes like a teenager. She's completely different at home, more grown-up. Her smile is always contagious, but now it's… cute.

The goddess really is a beautiful young lady. Seeing this side of her proves it.

My heart is beating a rhythm now… What have I gotten myself into?

She's a goddess!!

"Bell? Be-ll?"

"Ah, yes. What is it?"

"Ahh—nn."

"… Huh?"

She's making this a whole lot more complicated…

She's holding one of the crepes that we just bought up to my mouth with that radiant grin on her face…

While she finally lets go of my hand, she's on tiptoes holding the

crepe with both hands and trying to get me to open my mouth.

My arms flail as I struggle to get words out, eyes locked on the confection now inches away.

“Goddess, what are you doing?!”

“What do you mean? Say ‘ah’! Ready, ahh-nn. I always wanted to try this.”

“…?!”

My whole body is twitching… How pathetic…

I forgot what I was going to say, great. All right, maybe if I don’t say anything, she’ll get the message. My cheeks are on fire!

I know she’s in a good mood, but this is absurd! Maybe it’s the festival that’s giving her these ideas.

“Aww, what is it, Bell? Is it because I took a bite first?”

“N-no! It’s not that, it’s just…”

It’s a little embarrassing… and you are a goddess!! I have to respect you! Respect!

Being fed like that by an otherworldly deity? I have no manners at all!

Avoid eye contact! I already look pathetic enough! Come on, think! There has to be a way out! Ah! My own crepe!

“I bought that for you! To take a bite of your crepe would be disrespectful because I have my own. Please have a bite of mine instead!”

“… You got away…”

Her smile is gone, pouting a bit. At least she lowered the crepe.

But she shrugs it off. “Oh, well.” Her smile is back!

“Okay, we’ll do it your way. I’ll have a bite of yours.”

“Eh?”

“See? Ahhh-nnnn.”

“… Ah-nn.”

She closes her eyes. Her thin lips are open.

Okay, I can handle this. Just bring the crepe close to her mouth…

Chomp.

Her cute cherry-blossom lips jump forward as she takes a small bite. She looks like a cute, innocent child… Stop looking at her like that! I’m blushing again!

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She opens her eyes with her teeth still in my crepe and smiles like a mischievous fox before taking another massive bite from the pastry. She pulls back, her cheeks stuffed like a pretty little chipmunk's.

Just what does my face look like…?

There's a spot of cream on her cheek.

Must have come from the inside of the crepe. I can take care of it for her real quick.

I stop my hand in midair. What am I doing?! She's a *goddess!!!*

She doesn't want to be treated like this! Especially not by a human like me! Get her a napkin, idiot!

I start to pull my hand back, but she grabs my wrist with those delicate fingers.

"Hee-hee-hee, I want you to."

"……"

She smiles sweetly at me, blushing with eyes full of trust.

I slowly run my finger up her cheek. Her eyes clench and her body wiggles as if it's ticklish.

Whew…

Blood is pounding into my head.

My whole body is on fire, an itch I can't scratch. This is so embarrassing… or am I just shy?

She's got me wrapped around her finger.

"Well done, Bell! Next up, potato snacks! Let's go! Let's go!"

"W-we're going to keep going?"

"Of course! We almost never have time to enjoy something together!"

She takes my hand again and leads me back down the street.

I may have one foot in the grave, but for some reason I'm smiling, too.

Come to think of it, she's right.

We are a two-person *Familia*. We're always busy trying to make enough money to see tomorrow. I'm in the Dungeon; she's at her part-time job.

I can count the number of times we've been outside the room together on one hand.

We weave in and out of the many races of people flooding East Main.

I may look very out of place, but the goddess is happy. That's exactly what I want.

It started with a big roar from the crowd.

Released from its chains, a monster howled as it charged forward into the arena, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. The Battle Boar stood

more than two meters tall. Only a short-haired female tamer stood in its path. She nimbly rolled out of the way, her hair swinging around her head.

The crowd erupted at the display of sheer athleticism. Fifty thousand strong in the stands create a whirlpool of energy all flowing to the stadium floor.

The stadium, Anphiteatom, was located in Eastern Orario.

The curtain had just been lifted on Monsterphilia's main event. Thousands of citizens filed into the stadium to witness the spectacle.

The Battle Boar had been captured for just this purpose. It kicked off the stadium floor, intent on mauling the woman in its way. The beast's overwhelming power left cracks in the surface of the floor with each step. However, *Ganesha Familia*'s tamer was unfazed. She adeptly dodged all of the boar's charges, much to the delight of the crowd.

This battle was very similar to a bull fight. An attractive person in flashy clothing faced down a beast armed with a whip and a cape. The beast charged many times, but the tamer dodged by the smallest of margins.

It was her mission to tame the beast, not kill it. Seeing her calm demeanor in the face of life-threatening danger inspired awe and respect among the audience. They wanted to see more. They applauded every time the tamer emerged from a charge without a scratch on her.

The monster's bloodcurdling roars were amplified throughout the stadium by magic stone microphones to make sure even people in the upper deck seats got the full impact of the show. The stadium was absolutely electric.

"They've started…," Eina muttered to herself after hearing the noise erupt behind her.

She was stationed outside the stadium but could feel the vibrations of the monster's howls in her skin. She looked over her shoulder at the stone wall between her and the action.

Eina had been assigned this post by the Guild. She and a few other coworkers were in charge of directing fairgoers into the stadium as well as supporting *Ganesha Familia*'s members.

Monsterphilia was not an event held by the gods just for the fun of it. *Ganesha Familia* supplied the monsters and tamers for the show, but the Guild itself was responsible for setting up everything else.

It's not my place to question it, but why is there a Monsterphilia in the first place?

The managers of the Guild approved it. Eina had no input in the decision and simply had to do what she was told. She was not entirely comfortable with it.

While there was almost no risk to the city, monsters should not have been brought out of the Dungeon. Eina would have objected if she could. If the Guild was as concerned with city management and safety as

they claimed to be, then they should have done more to restrain the monsters themselves. Declawing them would have been a good start.

The monsters were scary beasts, after all.

The main purpose of this event couldn't be taming the monsters. It had to be for amusement. Creating this potentially dangerous situation just for fun was something that should have been brought to an end. At the very least, the Guild shouldn't have been involved. Eina's thoughts continued through to this conclusion.

"And now… the freak show. That hurts a bit."

"Huh? You say something, Eina?"

Eina shook her head. A coworker had overheard her grumbling to herself.

Orairo was home to many *Familias* and their adventurers. This might have sounded like a good thing, but most adventurers were not the friendliest of people. They had a tendency to play by their own rules. Their lack of manners around townsfolk caused a lot of problems for the Guild. It was up to employees like Eina to smooth things over.

In order to reap the benefits of the Dungeon, the Guild had to keep their adventurers in line as well as protect them. This festival was the only way to get the average citizen to see adventurers in a good light, so the Guild turned a blind eye to the danger. It couldn't be helped.

The words "yearly freak show" still lurked in the back of Eina's mind. She knew the Guild's reputation was on thin ice, and the festival was the best way to relieve the pressure.

Just as long as nothing goes wrong…

Fair season always made her nervous. She wouldn't be able to relax until the final curtain fell. Or maybe she was just too uptight.

Her friends and coworkers complained about not being able to see the show. She was busy contemplating the place of the Guild and massaging her temple.

"No, not here, either…"

"Maybe they're already inside?"

Hmm?

Someone she knew was walking toward her. It was Bell.

His head was on a swivel as he walked around the outside of the stadium, as if he was looking for someone. The goddess walking next to him must have been the head of his *Familia*.

Eina took a quick look at her coworkers. Seeing that they were still griping, she figured they could hold down the fort for a few minutes. She walked forward to greet the adventurer in her charge.

"Bell."

"Ah, Ms. Eina?"

"Bell, who is this half-elf?"

Eina chuckled for a moment at the blank look on his face before making a polite bow to Hestia and introducing herself.

"My name is Eina Tulle. I am a member of the Guild's secretariat and also Bell's adviser for Dungeon activities. It is nice to meet you in person, Goddess Hestia."

"Oh, that's how you know each other. Bell's counting on you."

Satisfied with the explanation, Hestia shook Eina's hand. Eina gave another bow while Bell watched in silence. He snapped out of his trance and asked a question:

"Why are you out here, Eina?"

"The Guild is in charge of the fair, so all employees have a job to do. I'm an usher of sorts, helping guests to their seats. So did you come to see the opening event, Bell?"

"Not yet, I'm looking for someone, actually. Um, she's a waitress… but she wouldn't wear her uniform out here. Ha-ha… Have you seen a human girl who doesn't have any money?"

"Not too sure I have…"

Eina couldn't hide a chuckle at Bell's way of describing the girl. Bell looked away, scratching his head. "Should have known…"

Eina went on to tell him that there was a small entrance fee to get into the stadium, so the chances a girl with no money got inside were slim. Bell nodded and lowered his head in a thank-you.

"Well, then, I'll keep looking around outside the stadium before heading back to East Main. She might not know about the fee and wind up here anyway."

"Sounds good. If I see a girl like that, I'll tell her to wait here."

Bell bowed one last time and turned to leave. Hestia saw an opportunity to speak with Eina privately and stepped forward once Bell was out of earshot.

Eina was a little confused but turned to face the goddess.

"Ms. Adviser."

"Yes, what is it?"

"You wouldn't use your position to try to make a move on Bell, would you?"

Hestia didn't break eye contact. Eina knew in a moment Hestia was serious.

"I like to keep my personal and professional lives separate…"

"Okay, I'll trust you."

Hestia patted her lightly on the arm, a solemn look in her eyes.

Bell, noticing the goddess was not behind him, came back looking very confused. Hestia walked out to greet him before the pair went on their way.

Eina felt like she had been pricked by a needle. She watched the two of them walk away, a trickle of sweat running down the back of her neck.

Massaging her temple again, she went back to where her coworkers were stationed at the base of the stadium.

“What the hell’s going on over there?”

“Complain all you want later, get some people over there now.”

“…?”

The mood had changed; voices were raised everywhere.

Eina’s eyes narrowed as she walked up to the group. “Excuse me, what’s going on?”

“Guild staff stationed at the west gate collapsed for some reason.”

“… Huh?”

“They’re awake, but they’re all sitting down on the job or lying on the floor… Could just be a bad hangover from last night. But everyone’s too far gone to do their job, so we’re sending some more people over there.”

The animal people Guild employee rolled his eyes in frustration.

But Eina felt a cold chill in her chest. She wasn’t just nervous now, her whole body started to tense up.

Am I overreacting…?

Another roar from the crowd echoed over the stone wall behind her. She looked up at the top of the wall, trying to steady herself.

However, a different echo, one from a monster’s roar beneath the ground, reached her ears as well.

It was a dark, dirty room with almost no light.

A single magic stone lamp hung from the ceiling, casting long shadows over everything in the room. Boxes standing a square meter tall lined the dusty, dank storage room. Different types of weapons and items hung on the walls.

Many cages were in here as well. The sound of chains echoed as the beasts inside the cages fought against their restraints. The iron cages were built in a lattice pattern. Monsters stuck their snouts out of the openings, baring their fangs and howling.

The room was under the stadium’s main stage. It was being used as the monsters’ waiting room.

Their cages would be moved to the surface by a staff member when it was their turn onstage. A tamer would be waiting for them when their chains were broken.

“What are you doing? We’re ready for the next one! Why won’t you raise it?!”

Clop-clop-clop. Sharp steps in high heels echoed off the stone floor outside the storage room just before the door opened to reveal a female member of *Ganesha Familia.*

She was the team manager for monster transportation. Her assistants never missed a beat, so when the next cage failed to show up on time,

she rushed to investigate.

She was ready to scold them, but no one responded.

"W-what's wrong? Hey!"

Her team members were on the floor all over the room.

The four men she had left in charge were sitting down, leaning against boxes with absent looks on their faces.

She ran to the closest one, fearing the worst. He was breathing. No injuries, either. Going to the rest of the team, they were in exactly the same aloof state. However, they were alive.

The only problem was that all of them looked like puppets that had their strings cut. There was no strength in their bodies at all.

"Ah… ah."

Monster poison…? No, it can't be… What the hell did this?!?

All of them were murmuring something. Their faces were beet red. Their eyes weren't focusing.

She had never seen anything like this. A chill crept through her body as she realized she didn't know how to help them. How could she cure what she was seeing for the first time?

What happened here…? She stood up and scanned the room, ignoring the howling and thrashing beasts still locked in their cages.

"—"

The air behind her suddenly shifted.

It was not an aggressive sneak attack, more like one friend creeping up on another. There was no intent to harm, which was why the woman was too slow to react.

Someone was standing behind her.

"Please stand still?"

"—ah."

A quick swish of cloth, and suddenly she couldn't see.

Her eyes were covered by delicate fingers that were smooth to the touch.

A heartbeat later, her whole body froze in place, limbs shaking ever so slightly.

A sweet smell licked her nose, a soft body pressed against her back, warmth enveloped her skin. All of her senses were paralyzed by a "beauty" she couldn't see.

It was an overwhelming "charm."

A "charm" she couldn't comprehend.

She couldn't fight back, she couldn't resist.

Her mind was going blank, thoughts evaporating all at once.

Her freedom was gone.

"Where is the key?"

"—e."

"The key to the cages—where is it?"

The voice whispered lightly into her ear, but the sound consumed

her consciousness. Her head leaned forward, her neck unable to support it.

She could not fight the words in her head, and she obeyed.

Her shaky right arm reached behind her back to grab a key chain strapped to her belt. The keys shook violently in her jittery hand. She raised the keys up to her shoulder.

"Thank you."

The hands covering her eyes left as the keys were taken from her hand. But her eyes didn't trigger. The girl did not see anything.

The presence behind her withdrew. Without its support, her knees buckled, and she fell to the floor, landing softly on her rear end.

She had fallen victim to the same "charm" as her team and joined their fate.

"My apologies."

Freya left the girl behind and walked farther into the storage room.

Guild staff and the "fierce members" of *Ganesha Familia* had been guarding the west gate. She had rendered them all helpless in order to come this far.

Freya didn't have the ability to fight anyone. She was just one of the many gods on Gekai. She had no special powers.

But she had her beauty. She literally was beauty itself.

She had a power that couldn't be controlled by reason. Other gods fell under her spell; humans and demi-humans didn't stand a chance. She had the overwhelming ability to put anyone in a trance on a whim.

This time she was using it to have a little fun.

The gender of her victims didn't matter. Their consciousness would leave them; they would forget they had bones to stand on. They became infatuated with her "charm."

As long as she was careful not to be seen, this level of infiltration was well within her power.

"……"

Freya stopped in the middle of the storage room.

Monster cages were lined up all around her, their occupants howling with renewed vigor. She listened to the explosion of beastly roars around her.

However, as soon as she lowered her hood, all of the beasts went silent.

"……"

Her beauty had ensnared them, too.

Skin the color of freshly fallen snow filled their eyes. Freya's silver hair and silver eyes hypnotized the monsters into a passive state, their muscles shutting down.

Even vicious monsters were not safe from her "charm."

"… You'll do well."

She looked over all of them individually before stopping at one

particular cage.

That monster was covered in a thick white coat of fur. Its arms were massive and its shoulders broad with bulging muscles. A line of longer, thread-like fur that matched Freya's hair color perfectly ran down its back ends in what looked like a stubby tail.

The wild silverback locked eyes with the Goddess of Beauty, its breathing getting heavier and heavier with each passing second.

"Come out."

She opened the lid of the cage with the key in her hand.

The monster obeyed Freya's instructions and stepped out of the lattice cage. The chains restraining its arms and legs jangled at its feet.

She had released a monster. She knew how dangerous this could be.

While she was pulling the strings, little details like that meant nothing to her.

She'd come here for one reason.

That boy is right outside…

Her target was Bell Cranell.

Ahh, but it's a pity. I wanted to watch him grow a little while longer…

She knew Bell was growing at an alarming rate. She didn't know why, but she could see he was improving by leaps and bounds.

No one could keep a secret from a god.

… I want to play with him.

Freya laughed to herself like a little kid.

She wanted to play a joke on the one she loved, just as if she were an immature child.

But she couldn't stop. Her love at first sight was driving her forward like a twinge of pain deep in her chest every moment she couldn't be with him.

She wanted to see him scared, see him cry, but above all, she wanted to see his courage.

"……"

"Fhaa… fhaaaa…?"

Freya lovingly stroked the cheek of the silverback, its nose flaring with each swell of air. She paused for a moment as a new thought went through her mind.

What if this monster accidentally killed Bell because she let it loose?

She hadn't thought of that but quickly shrugged it off.

If Bell died today…

I'll go after him.

If his spirit left Gekai, she would chase it to the ends of time and space.

I will hold him.

Once she caught him, she would hold him against her passionate breasts.

Her eyes glowed with love and tenderness, but her face showed a

love of cruelty. An absolutely evil smile unrolled from her lips.

She held the silverback's head with both hands, evil smile and all. Every muscle in the monster's body pulsed with energy.

So…

She leaned forward and placed her lips on the creature's forehead.

Wait for me?

A roar erupted from the storage room.

"Goddess, what were you talking about with Eina?"

"Ah, this and that."

The goddess and I have already done one lap around the stadium in our search for Syr. Now we're back on East Main. The streets are emptier now. Everyone's probably inside watching the tamers at work.

"Hey, Bell. This person you are looking for is a girl, isn't she?"

"Eh? Ah, yes, with hair and eyes the color of ashes. She looks grown-up and is a little taller than me…"

She wasn't asking about how Syr looks. Her eyes are only half open, staring at me. She's not blinking…

Why's she looking at me like that…? Got a bad feeling about this.

"Um… Goddess?"

"… Just like that adviser, you really have no clue."

"Eh…? What do you mean?"

"Who knows."

At least she's not staring at me, but she's pouting…

I swear her ponytails are alive, and they're flexing. Like they want to choke me…

What did I do? Why is she like this…?

We walk in silence for a small eternity.

"—?"

"… What is it, Bell?"

I feel something in the air and stop walking. The goddess still looks as angry as before when she looks over her shoulder at me.

Just now, something…

Something reaches my ears.

It's not the din of the festival; it's sharper, tenser.

"… A scream?"

Just as the words leave my mouth, a tidal wave of sound overtakes us.

"MONSTERRRRRRRRR!!!!!!"

The peaceful street erupts into an explosion of panic at that one word.

There it is.

A monster is at the end of the street, coming from the stadium.

It's charging down the stone road, all of its white fur standing on end.

The monster, the silverback, was enraged.

A storm within, muscles firing off at full strength, it breathed with enough force to blow everything out of its way. It wanted her, and it wanted her now.

It was looking for a goddess.

The last it saw of her silver hair was outside the stadium, disappearing into a crowd. The completely charmed monster rushed after her with more strength and power than it had ever had before, almost as though it was being pulled by an invisible chain.

Her love!

The goddess's affection!

The monster's purest, most basic instincts had taken over its body and driven it forward.

A monster's instincts didn't waver. Its quest for a goddess's love consumed it.

"Gaaaaahhhhhh!!!"

"Heeee!"

The silverback advanced down the street, swatting carts and boxes out of its way.

A crying horse managed to get out of the way. The driver of its cart wasn't so lucky. He was launched skyward and tumbled to the ground. The horse wheeled the empty cart back around to its master as the silverback charged by.

It was losing the scent of the goddess. Her sweet aroma was gone. Had it made a wrong turn?

The silverback stopped for a moment and tried to find her scent again. It looked in every direction, taking in big huffs of air.

Many people filled the streets once again—people running, people in shock, people screaming at the top of their lungs. The silverback was enclosed in a circle of humanity.

The silverback's eyes skimmed the crowd before suddenly coming to a stop.

Its eyes had locked onto a point, a certain someone.

It saw "her" with bloodshot eyes.

A small girl with black hair and blank eyes staring right back at him.

A being clearly different from the others around her.

Someone on a whole other plane.

Someone with the same qualities as the "goddess" he pursed.

A voice climbed into its ears:

“—Could you chase the small one?”

Those words whispering in its ear were hers.

—Found you!

The silverback took one big step toward the wide-eyed little girl.

“__”

It takes a step forward.

“… B-Bell.”

I grab the goddess’s hand and take one, two steps back.

Every hair on my body is standing up. I haven’t felt like this since “that” day.

A white body, silver hair running down its back. Its presence is overwhelming.

It has the eyes of a beast, no rhythm or reason. And it’s looking at me and the goddess.

I can’t breathe.

Why is there a monster here? What is happening? I’ve asked those questions before…

I’m facing something that shouldn’t be here. It’s the Minotaur all over again. I’m sweating, shaking just as hard as last time.

One of us is going to get overrun!

“—Do your best.”

Where did that voice come from…?

Chapter 6
BUMP • OF • CHICKEN!

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Chapter 6

BUMP ◆ OF ◆ CHICKEN!

"Ganesha! Ganesha! We have a major problem! Emergency!!"

Commotion erupted in a corner of the sunlit stadium.

Monsterphilia was still in progress. A tamer was currently riding a small, long-necked dragon like a bull at a rodeo on the main stage. The audience was too involved in the action below to notice what was going on above them.

"—What you hiding? I am Ganesha!"

"I know that, sir! Why are you introducing yourself now?!?"

Ganesha watched the fair from a great spot on the rim of the upper deck where he could see everything at once. When a member of his *Familia* rushed up to him, he thrust out his elephant mask and struck a bizarre pose.

Trying very hard to ignore his painfully awkward god, the man quickly spelled out what had happened below the stadium floor.

"Monsters have escaped! There are open cages in the holding room!"

"… Huh? That is a problem…"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!"

Ganesha straightened up so fast that spit flew out of his subordinate's mouth. The man continued to give his report. This time he had Ganesha's full attention.

He explained that all of the guards, including Guild employees, were incapacitated in the holding room. All theories pointed to someone outside the Guild as the perpetrator.

Ganesha listened to the tidings with a very calm face and waited until the man had finished before asking his own questions in a controlled, low voice.

"How many monsters escaped… were released?"

"N-nine, sir! Including some that are particularly dangerous…"

Ganesha grunted, slowly nodding his head. His elephant mask shifted along with him.

High-pitched voices rose up from the main stage. The tamer opened

his palm in front of the dragon's eyes, a signal to stop in place. A deep growl bellowed out from the dragon's gut, but it obeyed. Plopping its body to the ground, it licked the tamer's hand.

The crowd drew a collective breath. Turning to face the audience, the tamer waved to them. Moments later, he received a chorus of cheers and thunderous applause.

"All right, pursue the monsters at large! Also, contact other *Familias*! Ask all of the gods in the stadium for their cooperation!"

"Wait a minute, sir! It's our fault the monsters escaped! If we ask for help, our reputation will be compromised! Other groups might see this as an opportunity…"

"I am Ganesha, God of the Masses! I cannot allow any of the citizens to be harmed! Our treasure is the children's smiles. Throw away your ambition!"

"Y-yes, sir! My apologies!"

"Continue the fair as planned! Don't tell anyone else about this, and don't let the audience leave the stands! There will be panic if word gets out!"

"Understood! What about the perpetrator?"

"Let him go. He didn't release all of the monsters, so he was most likely trying to cause problems. He was after something. This could be a diversion, or perhaps he wanted to see the fair turn to chaos… I hate to say it, but I have to play along with his game. Our first priority is the safety of the people. Priority number one, understood? Now go!"

The man nodded and dashed off to spread the instructions.

Ganesha Familia sprung into action only five minutes after the incident was discovered.

"Monsters escaped?!"

At about the same time Ganesha was being informed of the situation, word got around to Eina and her group outside the stadium.

"Yeah… The west team manager saw them come out of the stadium's west gate. *Ganesha Familia* is running around in a frenzy… Eina, what do we do…?"

Eina got over the shock of this information quickly, switching into high gear.

"Get ahold of any *Familias* in the area, I don't care which ones!"

"Can we do something like that? The bosses will get angry if we go over their heads…"

Every Guild employee with decision-making power left their post to investigate the west gate when trouble was first reported. Only basic secretaries, like Eina, and assistants were still there.

Eina looked around at the group. All of them had reservations about overstepping their bounds. She could see it in their eyes.

"That's better than someone getting hurt! On top of that, Ganesha has put safety as the top priority. He shouldn't get angry if other *Familias* are involved. We have to act now before the injuries start piling up!"

"You're right. I couldn't live with myself knowing I could have done more…"

Eina coaxed the rest of her coworkers into action by drawing on Ganesha's wishes to make people happy. He and his *Familia* had spared no expense to help the Guild set up Monsterphilia.

The Guild employees looked at one another. Eina's words had moved them. They all nodded in agreement and started to discuss who would do what to get the word out.

Suddenly, a voice. "… Excuse me. Did something happen?"

Suddenly, a voice.

Someone was walking up to the group of guild employees.

Each of them lost his or her voice on seeing who was approaching them.

"A-Aiz Wallenstein…"

Eina herself was taken aback. Her eyes widened in amazement as the girl came up to them.

Aiz's supple thighs were only half hidden by a miniskirt. Her midriff was revealed by a short top. Despite not having any armor, her sword hung from her waist in its sheath.

A member of Orario's top-class adventurers stood before the bewildered Guild members. She was exactly what they had been praying for.

The man closest to her quickly explained what had happened.

The moment she understood the situation, she spun on her heel to face the person behind her.

"Loki."

"Yeah, I heard. Can't be datin' at a time like this. I'll let Ganesha borrow ya for a bit."

The Guild members saw Loki smile. Their prayers had been answered.

Eina and the others let out a collective sigh of relief, but she couldn't relax just yet.

"Any idea where the monsters are at?"

"Y-yes! A group of them was seen heading toward East Main!"

Eina's heart jumped. East Main. That's where Bell was looking for that girl.

He could be caught up in the worst of it.

"Misha, what species of monsters escaped?"

"Eh? Ummm. I think a swordstag, a troll, a silverback… maybe some

others…”

Silverbacks appeared on the lower eleventh. Swordstags and trolls were born on Level Twenty and below.

Bell wouldn’t stand a chance against any of them. He’d nearly died on the lower fifth…

Please, Bell, get out of there alive, okay?

Eina looked in the direction of East Main.

She had one more prayer, for Bell’s safety.

My ears are ringing from all the commotion.

“Ruguguu…!”

The sun is shining through all the flags on East Main. They look so out of place in this chaos.

I feel like an island in this torrent of panicked screams.

Now that I got a better look at the howling monster, it doesn’t have a tail. It’s just a thick stripe of long silver hair on its back. Chains are still shackled to its wrists, but they look like they were torn apart. Metal being dragged across stone—I hate that sound.

Silverback…

Eina has told me about many types of monsters. This is one of them for sure.

She also told me it’s born far below the lower fifth—way out of my league.

It really is the Minotaur all over again. I won’t be able to lay a finger on this thing!

Warning bells are going off in my head. It’s time to go.

“Gyaa…!”

It’s moving again!

It bends its knees, turning its body right toward me and the goddess!

—It’s coming!

Here comes a massive fist! I have to move!

“!!”

“Uwaaaa!!!”

Dive to the side! Grab the goddess and launch!

I got her, but there’s no time to make sure she’s safely tucked in my arms. I feel her screams against my chest. *Bam!* My shoulder into the stone road. Roll, now!

Two, three rolls and stop! That should be far enough, the monster already flew by. Get up and protect the goddess, now!

Okay, she’s behind me. The beast has to go through me if it wants her.

“Urrrrnnnn…!”

It's back up and coming this way!

Its eyes are fixed on me! Here comes another charge!

Why?!?

It didn't even hesitate! Just found me again and charged! The goddess will get trampled! I yank her hard to the right and out of the beast's path.

Huh? It changed direction?! In mid-charge?!?! So the silverback isn't locked onto me…

Oh shit…

It's after the goddess! And now it's airborne!

My legs move on their own. I have to get in its way, since the goddess is helpless. Before I know it, I'm between the two of them, but the monster doesn't even glance my way.

It does, however, send an arm.

"—Gwahhhh?!"

"Gugooooooo!!!"

I succeed in getting the goddess out of the way of a wrecking ball. Unfortunately, I take that wrecking ball square in the ribs.

It hits my armor, but it isn't strong enough to stop the crushing blow from coursing through my body. I… I can't breathe!

Oh, the punch sent me flying… That's why everything's upside down and blurry…

… Ah!

I fly through a food stall! Shattering a hole in it on impact, by the looks of things; splinters of wood are all over the place.

Oh wow… Here comes the pain… Come on, body, I need you. Okay, legs are still outside the stall, get on your elbow… Dah! Ribs… Slow and steady. That's got it…

"Ekkkkkkkk!!!!"

East Main has fallen into pandemonium.

I hear people screaming. I see blurs of them running away.

It kind of looks like that time all those spiders hatched at once, all scurrying away. The fairgoers are all disappearing into buildings and down side roads.

Why is no one helping the goddess??

"…!"

"Fhaa… haaa…!"

There she is, standing frozen in front of the monster.

She's cornered!!!

"Gh…! NOOOOO!!!!"

I ignore the pain pulsing through my body and charge straight for the silverback with tears pouring out of my eyes.

The chains! If I can just grab onto the chains!

"Gahh!"

The metal pulls taut as I grab the end, stopping the beast in its

tracks.

The monster looks back with its sharp eyes and pulls its arm forward.

I can't hold it long! My arms are numb, fingers are on fire!

"Ugh…!"

"Gigyaaa!!!"

This isn't even a contest. I may as well not even be pulling; it's too strong.

But I have to try! Every ounce of strength—! Lost it!

"Gyaaahhh!!!"

Its arm shoots backward, the chain flying over its head! Now's my chance!

His back is turned to the goddess!! Run! Got her hand!

"This way!"

—We are sitting ducks on the main street!

I pull the goddess behind me and make a break for the back roads.

It's coming after us! I can hear its howls!

Here comes another long chase… When will this end?!?

"Why is it after you!?!"

"You think I know?!?! Never seen it before, ever! I haven't done anything!"

I have a strong grip on her thin little hand. We're yelling and running through narrow streets as fast as we can. She wants to know the answer to my question even more than I do, by the sound of her voice. She's grabbing onto my hand, too…

I can still feel the presence of that monstrosity behind us. It's not going away.

It's set its sights on the goddess, and it's not giving up.

I've never seen a monster act like this, endlessly pursuing one target. It's like it's being manipulated by something smarter…

What the hell is going on?!?

I lead the goddess on a sprint through the back roads with all these thoughts running through my head.

These narrow, dark backstreets are doing nothing to calm my nerves. I can see the sky among the tall buildings around us, but there's no light down here.

We ran south from East Main when the silverback attacked. We're running in circles through the side streets between East and Southeast Main.

I have no idea where we are. There was no time to remember the route.

I take a glance behind me to check on the goddess. She doesn't look good. She's definitely in a good deal of pain. I can't see the monster behind her in the maze of dark streets.

But I know it's here.

It's following us, I can feel it.

Speed up! That's the only way to lose it!

Eyes front! Left, right, right again! We need to get away!

"…! Bell, no! Not this way…!"

"Eh?!"

The goddess's voice brings me back into the moment.

We just rounded a big corner. Now I know what she meant…

"—"

The narrow roads have ended, but a total mess stands before us.

The roads twist, overlapping and intersecting who knows how many times. Pieces of buildings randomly stick out into the street, stairwells snake through the entire block. It looks like a mass of rooms got mixed together and dumped onto this spot.

It's a dungeon, built by human hands above the ground. A labyrinth town.

"Daidaros Street…!"

It's a dirt-poor residential part of town where nothing makes sense.

I heard that the streets are so complicated that once you get lost in there, you'll never find your way out. Daidaros Street was named after the architect who designed this jungle. In terms of losing your way, it is very much a dungeon.

The artificial labyrinth spreads out below me, all the way to the city wall. The goddess and I stop at the top of the road that leads down to the entrance.

This is insane! If we go in there, we'll be fighting a dungeon and a monster at the same time!

The goddess is out of breath, her hands on her knees, shoulders heaving. We lock eyes for a moment, we're in tough shape. She knows it, I know it. Her eyes are shaking…

"GAAAAHHHHHH!!!!"

"!!"

The monster is behind us!

We have no choice now. I grab the goddess's hand and run downhill, straight into Daidaros Street.

The street becomes a wide stairwell. A dark brick jungle looms ahead.

We rush in. The thick, humid air weighs us down almost immediately.

Several shabby stone shacks litter the main entrance of the residential… no, labyrinth town. Many magic stone lamps dot the sides of houses, weakly spitting light onto the street. There are people out walking around above and below us. They look like they know their way around these impossible pathways.

That woman sees us! Maybe she'll help… or not. As soon as she sees the silverback, her eyes triple in size before she runs away. Others are doing the same. Why is no one helping us?!

“Guugaahhh!”

“…!”

It’s catching up. How long can the goddess keep this up? She doesn’t have Falna, like me.

Actually, she has kept up very well. But we have to keep moving, and she’s falling behind. Even now the beast is reaching for her!

“Goddess, this way!”

“O-okay…!”

We take a quick turn off the main road, in a completely different direction. This one goes up at a steep angle, but it also has branches. I pull the goddess into the closest turn. We’ve changed directions again! Change again and again, how many times now?

Did we lose it…?

We keep changing direction. Maybe it took a wrong turn and got lost?

I take a look over my shoulder, past the goddess. It’s not there. Maybe now I can finally catch my breath…

“—”

Something doesn’t feel right.

Small vibrations are traveling through the walls. I hear bricks cracking…

They are still a long ways off… a shadow?

Son of a bitch!

I can see a blotch of white on top of a building in front of the sliver of blue sky. That’s not a cloud…

It climbed to the top! It must have ignored the roads altogether and jumped from rooftop to rooftop like a wild animal swinging through trees! It’s coming after us from above!

It dives straight down like a bullet.

“Gyaaaaahhhhh!!!”

“!”

“Ah!”

A sneak attack from above! It’s going to land right on top of us! I have to let go of the goddess! It’ll crush us both!

It hits the ground with a bang, debris flying in its wake. The goddess and I get out of the way, but the beast is between us!

It’s facing me, and the goddess is backing up! Quick, before he turns around, I have to do something!

“Uhhhaaaooooooorrrrrrrr!!!!”

I take that blast of air and monster spit to the face. Nice teeth…

“—Hyaiiii!!!”

It’s not attacking… Was that a warning? Trying to scare me?!

Well, it worked. I can’t move a muscle. Everything is clamped down. The beast’s feral roar did what it was supposed to:

Scared the absolute shit out of me.

“Ragyaaa!!!!”

That thing isn’t fooling around. This feels like…

The lower fifth, below another beast, roaring in my face. The Minotaur… standing over me, drooling.

I can hear that mad cow’s howl… I just want to curl up, make it all go away.

“—Uuhhmm… aaaahhh!”

I’m standing at a fork in the road.

An enemy is in front of me. An enemy I’m not strong enough to cut. In the shadow of despair, the Minotaur. I want to get away.

There is a person over there. A very special person only I can protect. I can still feel her soft hand in mine, but it’s gone. I have to save her.

I’m scared—

Fear and duty. Cowardice and purpose. Instincts and emotion in opposition, unite.

I’m scared—

An undeniable impulse reaches out to a sense of responsibility.

I’m scared, but—

Even in the face of all of this…

—I’m a man, aren’t I?!?

… even the smallest part of a man’s resolve will not allow him to retreat.

Go!

Go!!

GO NOW!!

YOU HAVE TO!!!

DO NOT LEAVE “HER” BEHIND!!!!!!!!!!!

“YAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!!!!”

You listen to me, beastie. I’m not going anywhere!

I have no fear. I feel only courage in my veins. Forward!

Here I come, silverback!!!

“Gyaahhhhh!!!”

It’s moving to counter.

Its tree-trunk-size arm whips forward, the chain still latched to its wrist like a whip. My body twists on instinct, dodging the blow. I thrust my head down. Its sweeping right fist goes just over my neck.

I draw my blade. This is my chance.

A clear shot at the ribs under its arm. Thrust with everything you’ve got!!!

“Uhaha?!”

But…

Kishnnnn. My metal blade screams in pain.

The shock of impact shoots up my sword arm, my right wrist jammed.

My blade was rejected. It couldn’t pierce the beast’s white fur. For

some reason, silver specks are sparkling where my blade hit.

—The blade! It's broken?!

That realization hits me like a bolt of lightning. My blade is in pieces, floating away. The back of my throat is twitching…

I can't hurt it! My attacks aren't strong enough!

That moment seems to last forever, just me watching shards from my blade fall. Next thing I know, I'm in the air.

"Dahhh!"

The beast grabbed me with both of its hulking hands and pinned me against the wall.

All the air in my lungs leaves on impact. Eyes open as wide as they can go.

"Guruuuu…!"

The silverback's malicious face is just inches away from mine.

It bares its fangs before I wrap my head around the situation. Its mouth is big enough to take my head off in one bite. Sheer terror floods my face.

"Beeelllll!!!!"

Is it going to end like this?

Me squirming around and the goddess's voice screaming in my ear? I twist my body over and over, thrashing my arms to break its grip.

—My hand hits something!

There's a magic stone lamp just below me!

No time to think. I yank the lamp out of the wall with one hand. I know the brightness control is on the back. Now if I can just reach the dial… There! Up to max output!

The palm of my hand suddenly becomes as bright as the sun. I can't even keep my own eyes open. I shove the blazing lamp into the beast's eye.

"GYIIGAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!"

The silverback roars in pain, letting me go to clutch its eyes. The monster staggers a few steps backward.

I fall to the street with a thud, finally free of the thick fingers crushing my shoulders.

My entire body is in pain, but that doesn't matter right now. The goddess runs up to me with tears in her eyes. Before she can say anything, I grab her hand and take off running again.

"Bell…?"

"…!"

A pain that I can't describe surges through me.

I can't protect the goddess, no matter how much courage I muster.

I'm too weak to protect her…

Tiny, weak, feeble, delicate, soft, piece of trash, little punk, disgusting, nauseating.

I thought I had gotten over that night, but those words still haunt

me.

I can still hear that animal guy's voice ridiculing me in front of Ms. Wallenstein. Over and over and over.

It's exactly the same.

I was too weak then; I'm too weak now. This is too painful to take.

"Uwwwwaaaarrrrrr!!!"

"!"

The beast howls in the distance.

The very walls of Daidaros Street are shaking. The beast is angry.

It's still coming.

At this rate…

It'll find us for the third time. There will be no escape.

What do I do…? What the hell can I do?!?!

How can I help the goddess? How can I protect her? How…?

"—"

Then, the answer comes to me. So simple.

A simple thought shows me the way. Something even a weakling like me can do.

Just as long as the goddess gets away, that's all that matters.

"Hey, Bell, what's with that look…?"

The goddess manages to ask me a question through her ragged breaths. I have a plan; I'll see this through. The look on my face must have made her nervous. I heard it in her voice.

But I don't answer her, just turn right at the next intersection.

This road has a gentle downward slope. A new path framed in black stones opens next to it, a long tunnel that leads underground. It must be a drain. I can see a light at the other end, which means that this tunnel opens at the end of the block. It's an escape route.

I silently pull the goddess ahead of me and push her into the tunnel. She looks back over her shoulders, surprised to be ahead of me.

I give her one last push before stepping back to the tunnel entrance and sliding the iron gate shut.

"BELL?!?"

"Goddess… I'm sorry."

The bars create a cold world between us.

My face looks grave. It takes every fiber of my being to squeeze out my next apologetic words.

"Goddess, please go on without me."

"I… Wait, what are you going to do?!"

"… I'll draw the monster away, buy you some time."

There is only one way for someone as weak as I am to protect her.

I'll be a decoy.

I'll lure it away from here, giving the goddess enough time to escape to safety.

I don't think she understands my plan… She's just standing there

with a startled look on her face.

"What are you saying, you idiot?"

"Please, Goddess. This may be the last time I see you, so please listen to me."

"No! Absolutely not! I forbid you! Open this gate now, Bell!!"

"Goddess…"

She furiously shakes her head from side to side. She won't go willingly…

She's trying to squeeze her small body between the bars and frantically calls my name.

I'm so happy she cares about me this much… and sad at the same time.

There's no time. I get down on my knees and look her in the eyes. I have to make her understand.

"Goddess… I… can't lose my family again."

"…!"

I bare my heart to her, everything.

It was before I came to Orario, before I met the goddess.

I lost my grandfather, my only family.

He was killed by a monster. He was attacked when he left the village on an errand.

I wasn't there, I couldn't do anything. One of my neighbors told me what happened.

I still feel the void left by his death. Even now I have a painful hole in my heart that he used to fill.

My heart has probably been craving a family since then.

"I'm scared of losing my family… not being able to protect anyone."

I came to Orario to meet the girl of my dreams, the one I was fated to be with. That is not a lie. But it was my bond with my grandfather that pushed me this far. I came here to honor it, preserve it.

But, secretly even more than that, I wanted something else. To feel the warmth of a family.

The goddess gave me a new bond and family, a *Familia*.

I wanted a family.

"So please, Goddess. Let me protect you, my family!"

I can't protect her, but I said that anyway. No, I said it because I can't.

The goddess stands and listens, a look of pure agony on her face.

"… Please, get out of here quickly. Find help."

"B…… Bell!!!"

I've said my piece. I stand up.

The goddess's eyes are filled with tears, her face twisted. She looks at me, about to break down.

"… It will be okay. You know how good my Agility is. I'm an expert at running away."

It takes all I have to force a reassuring smile to my lips.

I take one step back, spin, and sprint back up the street.

She cries out over and over, but I don't look back.

I yell, "I'm sorry!" back to her. I'm sorry for being a useless weakling…

"……!"

I rub the tears out of my eyes with my arm as I run back up the sloping road.

I'm back to the intersection. The monster isn't here, but I back off into the shadow of a wall. Keeping an eye on the rooftops, I reach into my leg holster and pull out a tube of one of *Miaha Familia*'s marlin-blue potions and down it in one gulp.

The pain melts away. Strength once again fills my body.

I'm calm, focused, ready.

"Ruaaaa!"

Here it comes from the other side of the block.

I jump into the middle of the intersection, make sure it sees me run to the other side.

"Uuhh…?"

"Hey! Over here!!"

It looks in all directions. The goddess is nowhere in sight. I yell even louder to get its attention.

The silverback stops in the intersection for a moment, looking down all three of the roads. It pauses, looking down the path toward the goddess. I hold my breath.

"… Gyaaaaaaa!!!"

It worked!

It's coming after me. Time to get out of here!

Daidaros Street really is a maze. Everything looks the same: roads go in every direction, sudden staircases. It's enough to make me wonder if I've already come through here. I can't even tell which way is north.

While running this way, I noticed a few red arrows painted on the walls. They're *ariadne*—street signposts, probably painted by the locals. They must lead to the entrance of the labyrinth block. The goddess should be able to get out of here easily if she can find one.

On the other hand, they might lead to the core of the maze. Either one is safer than being around me.

I decide to follow the ariadne for a while. It's better than running around with no idea where I'm going.

"……"

We're being watched.

There are people hiding in the shadows, watching from windows of their homes. All their eyes are following the monster and me as we tear through the streets. They're scared.

Just who the hell is that…?

One set of eyes is boring into me. I can't ignore it. It's completely different from the rest; this person isn't afraid.

They've been watching me since the beginning of the chase. It's making my skin crawl. I can't shake it.

It's almost like they're observing me…

I can't describe this cold feeling flooding into my throat. I cover my mouth to cough.

"Gyaruuu!!"

"Gahh?!"

The silverback caught up to me before I could make it to the next intersection. I couldn't dodge his ambush from above and went rolling down the street. Rolling, rolling, rolling. I emerge from the road into a large open space when I finally stop.

It must be some kind of a park. A lot of roads and stairwells lead to this spot. There's even a shabby-looking fountain in the center spewing water into the air.

"Gyaraaaaa!!"

"?!"

The silverback bursts through the road I rolled out of. It's even angrier than before—losing the goddess must have enraged the beast further still. And it's coming right for me!

Somehow, it's figured out how to swing the chains on its wrists around like metallic whips. Dodge left, right, dodge dodge dodge!!!

The combination of its incredibly powerful arms with the metal chains is absolutely brutal.

"—?!"

After all of that, it gets me.

The blow was aimed at my head but strikes me square in the chest. A shriek of pain shoots out of my lungs.

I succeed in blocking the chain with what's left of my dagger, but the shock of the impact radiates through my body.

Red sparks fly from my blade as the beast pulls back the chain. The next moment, I'm spun to the ground like a rag doll.

"AH, gyhhhh?!"

I peel my torso off the ground with shaking arms. My body won't listen to me. I can't move forward.

This is hopeless; I can't touch the monster. Not even close.

I'm just staring at the stones in the road, in pain both physically and mentally.

I slowly force my neck upward to find the silverback. It's standing next to the fountain, growling and holding a chain in one hand. It's spinning. I can hear the chain whistling through the air. Here comes the final blow…

I don't want to die. I'm not ready to die. But this is hopeless. Part of me has already given up.

My strength is gone, my will almost broken. My neck feels like it could snap.

I wonder if the goddess got away… That's the only thing on my mind now.

It was like this then, too…

Just like this.

When that person came.

When Aiz Wallenstein saved my life.

But she won't save me this time. I would have liked seeing her face one last time. On the other hand, I'm glad she's not here.

She won't see me in this pitiful position again.

Thinking about that moment just made me more depressed. I drop my head back onto the street in shame.

"Bell!!"

"__"

Time freezes.

A voice pierces the fog in my head and grabs hold of my heart.

I raise my head. I can see clearly again. What I see makes my blood run cold.

Someone has come to help me. It wasn't "her," but it's someone very important to me.

Hestia looks down at me, struggling to catch her breath.

Why? Why did you come back?

That question resonates over and over in my head. I can't express the feelings that swell up in my chest.

"Ugyaruuu…"

"__"

Then, things go from bad to worse.

The silverback has found what it was looking for. Its eyes shift from me to its new target: Hestia.

And then those wide eyes focus on her.

The goddess is hunched over, trying to catch her breath. She's an easy target for the silverback. It springs into motion a heartbeat later.

"Goddess!!"

I run.

Breaking all of my limits, I run.

I force my beaten and battered body up, closing the distance to the goddess in less than a second.

I pluck her thin frame from the clutches of the beast and hold her tight.

"…!"

Its meaty hand grazes through my field of vision as I half carry the goddess into the closest road leading away from the park.

At least, I thought it was a road. We dive into a sharp stairwell at full

speed and tumble down the stone steps.

The world spins again and again, screams stuck in my throat.

"G-Goddess?! Are you okay?"

"Yes… I'm fine."

We land on a particularly wide step with a thud. Fighting back the pain in my own body, I make sure she isn't hurt. She looks dizzy, her head is flopping around, but her voice is clear.

I'm relieved for an instant, and then I let her have it.

"Why are you here?! I told you to run away, far away! Now luring it away was meaningless…!!"

The goddess's clothes are soaked with sweat. She must have run all around Daidaros Street looking for me.

Either she predicted that I would follow the ariadne, or she followed the eyes of the onlookers and the howls of the silverback to find me.

Why did she come back?! All of my emotions are mixed, turning my voice inside out as I speak.

"… You really have no clue, do you?"

That's what she says to me.

She wipes her dirty face with her arm and gives me a nice smile.

"I can't just run away and leave you behind, now can I?"

"…!"

"You want to protect me? Right back at you."

She doesn't stop there. She silently mouths the words:

"You made a promise, right?"

"—Ah."

I remember.

A promise that I should never have forgotten.

I made her a promise on that day. I swore to her.

—*"Please don't leave me alone."*—

I broke my promise when I gave up.

I was about to leave her on her own.

"… But, like this, both of us will…"

My face may have relaxed, but those words nearly tear me apart.

Sensing that I can't finish that sentence, the goddess puts on a strong face and says in an equally strong voice, "It's too early to give up, Bell."

"Eh?"

"I have an idea."

She reaches into the back of her robe and pulls out a small case.

She beams a triumphant smile when I look at the case. She starts to open it.

"Ah!"

"Huh?"

She freezes with her hand over the lid.

She looks up behind me, her mouth half open.

I follow her eyes to the top of the stairwell. A wild silhouette is

diving right for us!

We lock eyes for a moment, our faces instantly pale.

“GYAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!”

“AHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!”

I grab what I can of her and jump.

The silverback lands hard, turning the spot we’d just inhabited into a crater. The goddess and I run as fast as we can down the last part of the stairwell.

She overtook me? When did the goddess get this fast?

Did she just say she wanted to protect me?!?

“Kyaaaa!!”

“G-GODDESS!!!”

The goddess yells as she trips over a stone in the road.

Time slows. Her hands are straight up, falling forward. I burst forward to catch her before she crashes to the ground. The silverback is right behind us.

“Sorry to be rude, Goddess!”

“Wahh?”

No time for complaints.

I hold her in my arms, completely violating all manners. My arms are wrapped under her shoulders and knees as I pick up speed.

I’m carrying her like the heroes carried the princesses in those stories. Her face is bright red against my chest.

“Sorry, Bell. I know this is hardly the time, but I’m sooooo happy right now!”

“What the heck are you saying, Goddess?!?!”

We’re inches from death and she’s happy?!? I don’t understand at all.

I keep running. I have to ignore my confusion to survive this incident. The goddess swings her arms around my neck, and I tighten my grip on her. I summon every ounce of energy I have left to keep running. It helps that the goddess’s body is unbelievably light. I make my way through the labyrinth at a full sprint and somehow manage to pull away from the monster.

But.

Luck abandons us at the last moment.

“A… dead end…”

Three tall houses surround us, the long road having ended in a cul-de-sac. There is only one road in here, and there’s no point turning back. The monster has us cornered.

I set the goddess down before taking a quick look around. Several of the residents are looking down at us. They quickly hide when they notice I can see them.

Monsters are scary. I know that they aren’t helping us because they’ll get dragged into this situation and possibly eaten. I don’t blame them for hiding.

After all that running, we can't get away.

The goddess scratches her chin, like she's thinking of something. I drop my head in despair.

"… No, this is good."

"EH?!"

She only whispered those words, but I do a double take when they reach my ears.

She looks up at me with a confident smile, diminutive stature and all.

"Bell, you will slay that monster."

"… uh?!"

"I will update your status right now. You will use up that power to take it down."

Sure, she could update my status, and I would stand a better chance in a fight than before.

However… it won't be enough.

The silverback is a lower-eleventh monster. I only just got out of the sixth alive. That's five floors' difference. An adventurer's strength can be measured by the number of floors they've conquered. By the same token, a monster's strength can be measured by the floor on which they are born. The difference in floor is the difference in power. Even if I got a little stronger from a status update, I obviously still have a long way to go to be on par with the silverback.

I wouldn't measure up in a fight. And on top of that…

"… I can't, Goddess. You saw it, too, right? I can't scratch that monster. Even if I got a little stronger, I wouldn't be able to land a killing blow on the silverback."

The problem is with my basic attack strength.

When I put all of the Strength of my current status into what was supposed to be a killing blow before coming into Daidaros Street, it was blocked by the silverback's fur.

Even with a stronger status backing up the weapon in my hand, I don't think it can penetrate the beast's defense.

"I… can't slay it."

My head falls as I mutter those words. I'm so pathetic.

All of those abusive things that animal guy said. All the other customers trying not to laugh and failing. I can see everything in my head so clearly, and all of it is telling me just how weak I am.

I can't hurt the silverback, let alone slay it. I just can't.

To top it all off, I have no confidence whatsoever.

"What if your attacks get stronger?"

"—Eh?"

"Could you slay it if you could do damage?"

She asks before opening the case in her hands. She removes the contents and holds it out for me.

A black knife encased in a black sheath rests in her palm.

I slowly reach out to take the weapon from her. I stand there almost in shock as I take the blade from its protective cover. The handle and sheath are black; the blade is no exception.

The black knife doesn't curve like a claw. It's straight as an arrow.

Plus, a series of complicated markings decorates the edges.

It starts glowing a deep purple in my hand, almost as if the "god knife" is responding to my touch.

I stand there, admiring the weapon and its beauty. It feels sacred, as if it was created by the gods themselves.

I look back up at the goddess. Her crystal-clear eyes meet mine.

"Bell, what happened to the boy I know? Didn't you go deep into the Dungeon looking to pick up girls just a few days ago? What happened to the Bell who swore to get stronger, to never give up on his dreams? Where did he go?"

The goddess pulls her shoulders back and keeps talking like we were back at home.

"I believe in you. I realize I'm not part of that 'adventure.' I know that. If adventurer Bell Cranell is really after a monster of a woman, Wallensomething or other, then a monster like this shouldn't be a problem."

Her face is dead serious.

"I'll help you win. I'll make you win."

"……"

"You might not believe in yourself right now. How about believing in me? And I believe you can do this."

I feel like I'm about to burst into tears. The tip of my nose is numb. Waterfalls might be building up in my eyes.

She's smiling back at me. I wipe the tears from my eyes with my sleeve and nod a "Yes" in reply.

The sun was brightly shining overhead.

The large ring of light in the sky cast many deep shadows over the roads of Daidaros Street and the many races of inhabitants living there.

The sun's rays were particularly strong on a long, dead-end road.

Faster, faster, faster! Hurry!

Hestia's fingers were a blur as she muttered under her breath.

She sat behind a kneeling Bell, working furiously to update his status.

Bell had removed his badly damaged light armor, leaving behind only a black undershirt. Hestia placed a drop of her blood onto the back of his shirt; one layer of fabric was not thick enough to keep her from writing hieroglyphs into his skin. Her hands did not slow down.

It was unnecessary to follow them with her eyes. All she had to do was find the excelia within him and draw it out to change his status. As long as she could locate his excelia, one inner shirt wasn't going to get in the way.

Listen up, Hestia, this is important.

Hesita's nerves were on ice. The monster could come at any moment. Hephaistos's voice ran though her head.

This knife has your hieroglyphs, your blessing. This weapon is alive.

The "Hestia Knife" was forged from Hephaistos's mythril and engraved with Hestia's blessing. It was a blade with its own status.

There were so many hieroglyphs on it that the entire weapon turned black.

It is the same as a child who received Falna. The weapon will grow stronger using the wielder's excelia along with him.

The knife was engraved with Hestia's hieroglyphs—only someone with her blessing could wield it. This made it unsalable and useless as a weapon. Hephaistos told her one more thing:

If the wielder gets stronger, so will it. As an adventurer gets stronger, he will unlock more and more of this blade's potential.

It was the perfect "high-quality blade for newbie adventurers."

An ever-growing partner, it would never be too strong or too weak for its user.

Right now, this weapon is about as powerful as tissue paper. However, it will take its first breath when it reaches the boy Bell Cranell's hands and grow from there.

If the blade's user stayed weak, so would it.

But if the user became the "most powerful" adventurer, it would become the "most powerful" weapon.

A weapon that can instantly become the best is bad for business. It'll put us smiths out of a job. I won't be making another one of these, ever.

She might have complained throughout the entire process, but Hephaistos had made her wish into reality. Hestia thanked her many times over.

Now, the "Hestia Knife" was growing alongside Bell.

She was making it into a weapon that could slay the silverback.

The only problem is…

Bell's skill, Realis Phrase. How much would he grow, and how much stronger would the weapon become?

"Goddess! It's here!"

"!"

It rounded the corner of the long road, spotting them immediately. Hestia's heartbeat shot through the roof.

At the same time, she finished the last stroke. Bell's status update was complete.

Level One

Strength: G-221 → E-403 Defense: H-101 → H-199
Utility: G-232 → E-412 Agility: F-313 → D-521 Magic: I-0

…?!?

Bell's status had grown over 600 points?!

His growth knew no bounds. And he was still getting stronger. This was anything but a normal growth speed.

The flames of jealously toward Aiz burned in Hestia's heart, but she also felt reassured.

With this much…

The weapon had become very potent.

The black blade was pulsing dark purple light in his hand. It was alive and well.

It's all up to Bell now!

She put her hand on his back and put all of her strength into a big push to give a boost.

"Now, go!"

"Now, go!"

With those words, Bell's perception of time and space narrowed to a very thin line.

His heart beat in his ears. His feet were enveloped in heat. But his head was clearer than it had ever been.

He had crouched down while Hestia updated his status. His body was ready to take off at a full sprint.

Power filled his legs, right knee up and ready to blast off.

"GYAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!"

The monster stood directly in front of him at the end of the road. Its enraged howl echoed down the long street.

Silverback. The monster that, even with his updated status, was Bell's worst nightmare.

Victory was a long shot. Bell himself wondered if he really had a chance.

However, even if he didn't believe in himself, he could put his faith in Hestia's words.

He sprang forward, his goddess's words filling him with determination and courage.

"__"

The silverback fell silent.

Bell had never moved this fast.

Six hundred status points had given him speed like nothing before.

Despite the distance still separating them, the silverback knew at that moment it wasn't fast enough to defend against a killing blow.

Are you listening, Bell? Remember what I'm about to say. Don't do anything reckless, though. Understood?

Eina's voice ran through Bell's head as he cut through the air toward his target.

No matter how strong, no matter how thick their defense, monsters all have a common weak spot.

Bell still remembered Eina vigorously explaining the basics to him, pointing at him.

If you hit it, even a dragon will fall. It's their one true vulnerable spot.

He remembered, very clearly, Eina's voice telling him what to do next.

One strike. If you can pierce their skin with just one strike, any monster can be slain by an adventurer's blade.

The place that made a monster a monster, their one and only "core."

I don't need to say any more, right? Yes, the one thing all monsters have hidden in their chest—

Their magic stone. Cutting it was the most effective way to slay any monster.

Bell saw his target, a point on the monster's chest.

The beast charged forward, feet pounding the street. The silverback's arms lightly shook in the air. Bell used what time was left to line up his strike, his eyes focused on that one spot.

The "Hestia Knife" blazed purple in his grip. Its newfound strength gathered into the tip of the blade and sent a beam of light into the heavens.

All the power gathered in the blade, all of the strength in his body, every last drop of energy went into this thrust.

Muscles tore and bones cracked as Bell's dagger pierced the monster's chest, his body sticking out like a spear.

"YAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!"

Penetration.

"Gyaaa!!!"

The black blade struck the monster's chest head-on.

Bell felt the dagger hit something harder than flesh or bone. It sent a wave up his arm.

The silverback's eyes went wide as it started to fall backward.

"—?!"

Bell's momentum carried him up and over the monster. He let go of the knife and went flying.

He couldn't slow down. Bell didn't have time to prepare for a hard landing. He had focused everything he had into one attack to finish it off. However, his body reacted on its own. He flew in a perfect arch,

curling up into a human bullet.

He was on the ground before he had time to take another breath.

"Guhheee?"

He hit the ground rolling, finally coming to a stop after seven somersaults.

Getting up, starry eyed and dizzy, Bell took a few deep breaths before turning around.

The silverback was on its back, arms and legs sprawled out in the middle of the road. A piece of the monster's body started to collapse, the black blade standing straight up out of its chest. Time was standing still.

The magic stone at the monster's core was shattered. More and more of its body collapsed in on itself before turning into ash. It flickered for a moment before being carried off by the breeze, leaving no trace behind.

Click click. The "Hestia Knife" hit the stone road as the last of the beast disappeared. The weapon lay in the middle of the street, glowing purple.

Cheers erupted from all around him.

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Bell's battle with the silverback had moved the residents of Daidaros Street who had watched it from a safe distance. People who had hidden in the shadows and behind windows now came out of the woodwork in droves, clapping and cheering at the top of their lungs. Even the stadium hadn't been as alive with glee as this corner of the labyrinth town.

A smile appeared on Bell's face in the middle of all the applause.

He looked back to the end of the road to grin at the goddess, to say, "I did it!" That's when he saw her body collapsed on the ground.

"Goddess?!?"

Bell grabbed the "Hestia Knife" before running to her aid, his face pale and breaking out in a cold sweat.

Her light body was limp in his arm, her eyes closed. Bell's face turned yet another shade of white. Bell gently picked her up and ran out of the alleyway to a glorious send-off of cheers.

"I hurt Hestia… but what's done is done."

Came a voice from the roof of a house overlooking the dead-end road.

Freya was talking to herself. She had been watching Bell from the best "seat" on Daidaros Street.

Her silver eyes locked onto Bell as he held Hestia tightly against his chest.

At first, she was disappointed that things hadn't gone as planned. But she smiled up at the blue sky.

"Congratulations. You still have a long way to go, but… Hee-hee, yes. You were very heroic."

Freya watched Bell's white head as the boy ran down the road, making a beeline for the exit. She squinted her eyes.

Freya turned to leave, her silver hair sparkling in the sunlight.

"Let's play again, Bell."

"Guooooooooo!!!?!"

The troll was slain in one decisive blow.

"Nn, the end?"

"Yes…"

Aiz withdrew her silver sword from the troll's body, flicked off the blood, and slid it cleanly back into its sheath in one smooth motion. She watched the monster fall to the pavement with a thunderous boom. Townsfolk instantly came out of their hiding places and surrounded Aiz

with cheers.

Loki stood behind Aiz, supporting her head with her hand and looking bored out of her mind. A small "hmmm" escaped her lips.

"I'd say they didn' have their own rhythm. Looks like everybody's all right, no big problems… Feels like they were dancin' to someone else's beat."

Aiz nodded to herself, agreeing with Loki's assessment.

They had rushed all over the East Block protecting the citizens. However, the monsters hadn't run away, just wandered around the city as if they were looking for something.

Aiz couldn't shake the feeling that something had guided these monsters from above.

"That all of 'em?"

"Not quite… There is still one left."

Out of the nine monsters that escaped, only the silverback remained unaccounted for.

That was a monster that Aiz could slay in an instant. Loki was even less interested but started to run anyway. She wanted this monster hunt to be over already. Aiz followed silently behind her.

They headed for East Main after talking with a few citizens who had seen the silverback from their hiding places.

"Ehhhh? What's this, over already?"

Rather than seeing scared faces and a rampaging monster, the townsfolk were celebrating in the street.

Loki went up to the edge of the crowd to get some information.

"Hey, lady! Where's the monster? What's goin' on?"

"Didn't you hear? That boy struck it down! Heard it from a few folks from Daidaros. They ran deep into that maze, and he slew it with one strike!"

"Hold up, lady. 'That' boy? Who's 'that' boy?"

"You mean you didn't see him run through here? A young adventurer with reddish eyes and white hair? Yeah… looked like a rabbit!"

"Huh?"

Loki's face contorted with confusion, but the blond girl standing behind her jumped.

White hair…?

She had seen someone like that.

This morning, looking outside from the café.

The red-eyed, white-haired boy who had been hurt because of her.

"Excuse me! Please let me through!"

A new wave of noise swept over the crowd. "That" adventurer had returned.

People in the crowd started cheering, pushing to get a better look. Loki ran into the swam, yelling, "Me, too! Me, too!" Aiz stayed behind,

standing still and feeling a little lonely.

Aiz didn't want to be left out, so she walked up to the edge of the crowd and stood on her tiptoes trying to get a good look.

"—Excuse me!!"

"!"

At that moment, a boy ducking as low as he could burst out of the crowd and right past her.

Her golden eyes followed him, trying to figure out if it was him.

… It really is.

The boy didn't acknowledge her as he rushed by. Aiz watched his back shrink into the distance.

There was no mistaking him. He was the boy she had saved from the Minotaur.

He slew… a silverback…?

He was weak. Her comrade may have gone a little overboard, but the boy had been a clumsy, inexperienced adventurer.

The boy she remembered could never have slain a silverback.

"… Congrats."

The word left her lips before she realized it.

But she wanted to congratulate the boy who had run out of the bar, humiliated and spewing tears, on his incredible growth.

"……"

She wasn't interested in the trick he used to slay it, but still.

She decided that for the time being, she should seek him out at least once and apologize.

Click. A door closed.

Bell ran up to the girl who came out of the room, Syr.

"S-Syr, how is she? How is the goddess?"

"She's all right. Just exhausted."

"Exhausted… so that means…?"

"Yes, she'll be just fine."

The sun was setting outside the window.

Bell was on the second floor of The Benevolent Mistress.

After running through the crowd on East Main, he happened to run into Syr. She suggested bringing the unconscious Hestia to the bar.

People were starting to calm down after the eventful Monsterphilia. Damage had been kept to a minimum by *Ganesha Familia* and the Guild's quick response. There were no injuries, let alone deaths, among the fairgoers. In fact, Bell was the only one hurt this afternoon.

The one responsible for today's incident was still at large, and there were no leads. This was because all of the *Ganesha Familia* and Guild members who'd been attacked couldn't remember anything, as if they

had been cursed by a witch's magic. The case was closed without knowing what the perpetrator wanted.

All was quiet on the second floor of The Benevolent Mistress, away from the bar below. Hestia was resting in a room while Syr and Bell stood in the hallway. The setting sun shone through a west-facing window, filling the wooden hall with reddish light.

"That's such a relief… She just collapsed. I didn't know what to do…"

"Hmm, well done today, Bell."

She smiled at the visibly drained boy and timidly started talking.

"I'm very sorry about today. If I hadn't forgotten my wallet, you wouldn't have gotten caught up in that mess…"

"What are you saying? It's not your fault at all!"

Syr looked so apologetic as Bell tried many times to reassure her. After a few long moments, her face relaxed. Bell was relieved.

"But today, so many people were talking about you. How brave that adventurer, how brave you were."

"Ehhh…"

"I think so, too. Actually, I saw you fighting the silverback on Main Street for a moment…"

"I wasn't that brave… All I did was run away, and I couldn't damage it at all…"

Bell strung words together confusedly. He didn't know how to react to her kind compliments, so he just put on a smile and shrugged his shoulders.

Syr giggled when she saw his face, her light gray hair shaking.

"Even so, you looked really good."

"Eh?"

"… I probably shouldn't say this, but seeing you face down that monster… I fell for you at that moment."

She whispered those words into his ear behind her hand. Bell's eyes shot open.

Syr stepped back, her face tinted red by the evening sun. A beautiful smile bloomed on her lips.

"I was asked to assist at the bar, so I will excuse myself now."

"Eh, um, yeah…"

"Don't worry about the bed, she can use it. Well, then, Bell. Until next time."

Thump, thump, thump. Bell was left speechless as he watched Syr walk to the end of the hall and down the stairs. He scratched his head.

"Was she teasing me…?"

Her eyes had looked a bit like she was playing a cruel joke, or maybe that was just the sunlight. He didn't know what to believe. Bell did his best to get his cheeks to cool down before walking over to the room where Hestia was sleeping.

Maybe I should let her rest…, he thought while looking at the number plate on the door.

Thump! The sound of something hitting the floor reached his ears moments later.

"?!"

Bell burst into the room. He found Hestia on the floor, as if she had rolled over and fallen straight down.

However, she landed facedown in a very comical, unladylike pose.

Bell yelled out as he ran over to her. He kneeled next to her, picked her up under her shoulders, and held her.

"G-Goddess! Goddess?! What's wrong?! What happened?"

"Ah, Bell… It's nothing… I tried to get up, but I wasn't strong enough…"

"Not strong enough…? I heard that you were exhausted. Just what were you doing for the past three days?"

The goddess's eyes wandered off.

"*Dogeza*."

"Do-ge-za??"

"I did *dogeza* in front of a stubborn goddess who refused to nod her head up and down for thirty hours in a race of endurance…"

"T-thirty hours…?! Just what is *dogeza?* Some kind of torture?!"

"No, a technique. It's the technique to end all techniques."

Hestia kept muttering "technique" over and over; she wasn't making sense. Bell broke out in a cold sweat.

"But why, Goddess…? Didn't you say you were going to a party?!"

"… This."

"Huh?"

Hestia's shaking hand reached around and pulled out the black knife that was tucked into the back of Bell's belt. It suddenly hit Bell that he had no idea what this blade was or where it had come from.

He was about to ask her where and how she got it, but he gasped before he could get the words out. His eyes found the hieroglyphic Ηφαιστος engraved in the corner of the sheath.

—*Hephaistos.*

This was the only symbol he understood without being able to read it.

It was the logo on top of the weapons shop that he thought he would never have any connection to, *Hephaistos Familia*.

"Goddess, isn't this…?"

"Sorry to make you worry… But I couldn't just sit on the sidelines. Being supported, being saved all the time… I just couldn't put up with it."

Bell held the handle of the weapon with shaking hands as Hestia pulled off the sheath.

Bell took another look at the black blade itself.

The cutting edge was completely straight. He could tell just by looking that this weapon was far more powerful than the one he carried now. Could all of these detailed markings covering it be hieroglyphs?

The entire weapon was the same color as Hestia's hair. The blade glowed a deep purple hue in Bell's hand. It was like a baby breathing in its father's arms.

"I knew. You are always going to Hephaistos's shop and looking into that window. I don't think this is the blade you wanted, but this is the only one of its kind in the world. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Well, yeah, but… Hephaistos's weapons are extremely expensive… What about the money?!"

"It's okay. Everything has been taken care of."

Hestia's voice was weak, her eyes cloudy.

She looked at Bell with a weak and wearied face but smiled softly.

"You want to get stronger, right?"

"!"

"I told you I'd help, didn't I? At least let me do this much for you."

"Hhh… ehhhh…"

"I want to help you more than anything, more than anyone… Because I love you."

"…!"

Torrents of tears fell from Bell's eyes.

Hestia's cheeks turned light pink as she smiled from ear to ear.

"Please count on me anytime. I am your goddess, after all."

Bell was past his limit.

He hugged Hestia to his chest, face soaked in tears.

"Goddess!!"

Bell held on to her tiny frame in the same manner a child holds a teddy bear.

"Hey, hey, the blade is still out. That's dangerous, you know?"

It was very hot against his chest. She might have said it, but she wrapped her hands around Bell's back.

She nestled her head up against his neck, running her fingers through his snow-white hair.

The sound of his sobbing and sniffling filled her ears.

He was showing her raw emotion, not hiding anything. She felt that this crying boy loved her more than anyone else.

Ahhh, I'm sooooo happy….

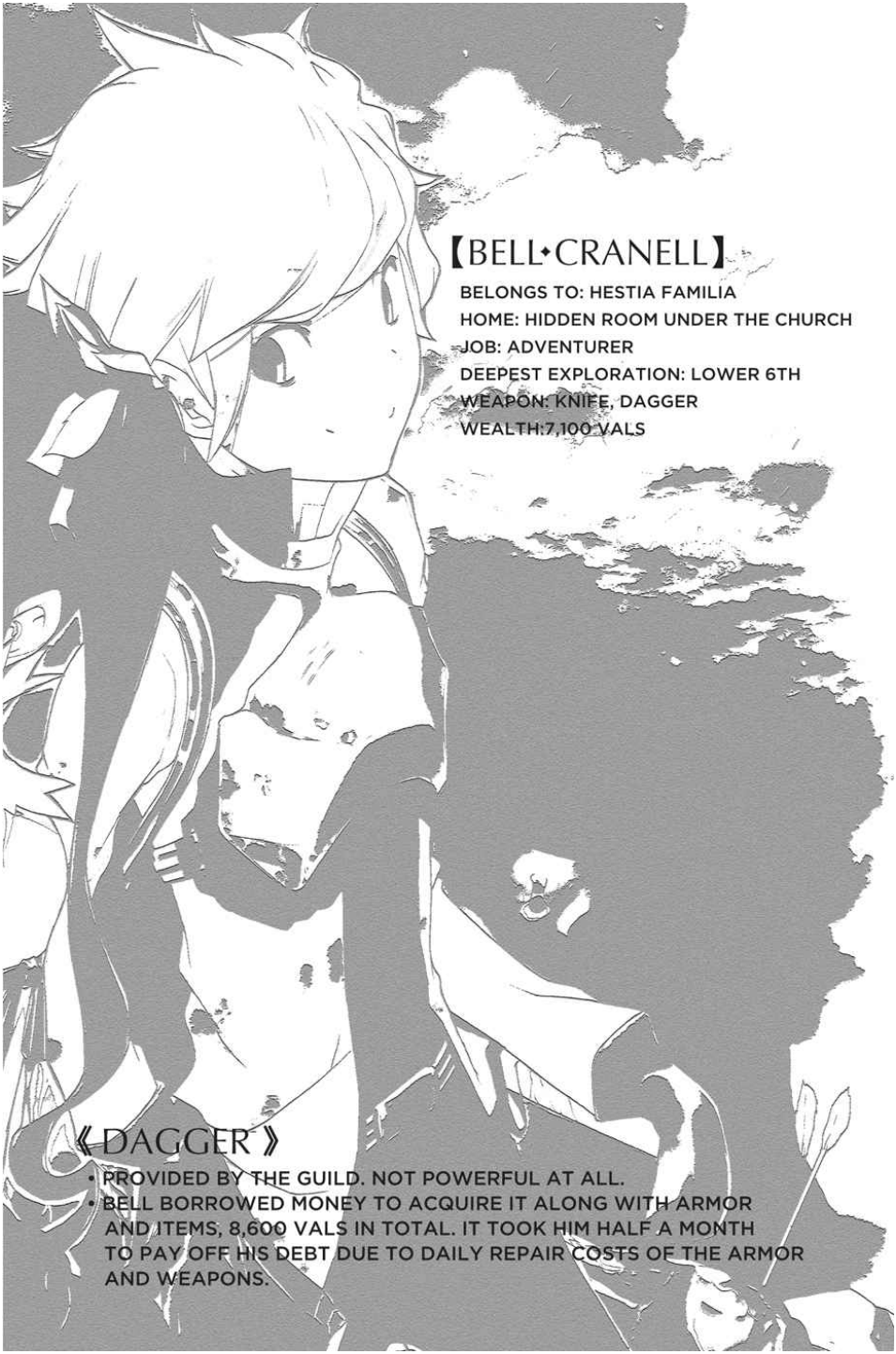
In reality, Hestia wasn't very romantic. She was only putting on a strong face for the boy.

But it was okay to fake it a little, as long as it was for him.

These thoughts went through Hestia's mind as she lay happily in Bell's embrace.

This is true love. We are perfect for each other.

In the last moment, Hestia misunderstood in a very big way.


【BELL•CRANELL】
BELONGS TO: HESTIA FAMILIA
HOME: HIDDEN ROOM UNDER THE CHURCH
JOB: ADVENTURER
DEEPEST EXPLORATION: LOWER 6TH
WEAPON: KNIFE, DAGGER
WEALTH:7,100 VALS
《DAGGER》
• PROVIDED BY THE GUILD. NOT POWERFUL AT ALL.
• BELL BORROWED MONEY TO ACQUIRE IT ALONG WITH ARMOR AND ITEMS, 8,600 VALS IN TOTAL. IT TOOK HIM HALF A MONTH TO PAY OFF HIS DEBT DUE TO DAILY REPAIR COSTS OF THE ARMOR AND WEAPONS.

STATUS

Lv. 1

STRENGTH: E 403 DEFENSE: H 193 UTILITY: E 412
AGILITY: D 521 MAGIC: I 0

《MAGIC》

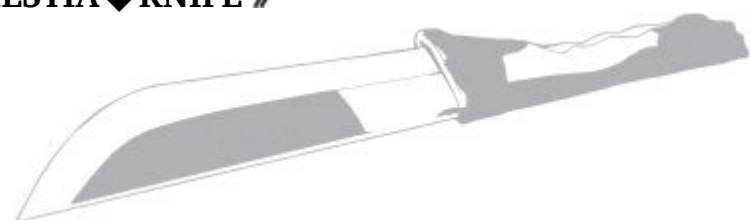
[]

《SKILL》

【 REALIS PHRASE 】

- RAPID GROWTH
- CONTINUED DESIRE RESULTS IN CONTINUED GROWTH
- STRONGER DESIRE RESULTS IN STRONGER GROWTH

《 HESTIA◆KNIFE 》



- THIRTY YEAR LOAN, 420 PAYMENTS
- A PROMISE MADE THROUGH FORCED LABOR AT HESPHAISTOS FAMILIA'S BABEL BRANCH LOCATION. HESTIA'S EXTREME SHOPPING.
- "A HIGH QUALITY BLADE FOR NEWBIE ADVENTURERS" CREATED BY HEPHAISTOS HERSELF AFTER MUCH DELIBERATION.
- HESTIA'S HAIR, BLOOD "IKORU," AND HIEROGLYPHS WENT INTO ITS CREATION. THE KNIFE HAS A STATUS OF ITS OWN.
- IT GAINS EXPERIENCE ALONG WITH ITS USER AND GROWS. THE WEAPON IS ALIVE.
- ONLY SOMEONE WITH HESTIA'S BLESSING CAN USE IT. IT WILL BECOME WORTHLESS IN ANYONE ELSE'S HANDS.
- WHEN ITS USER BECOMES "THE BEST," SO WILL THE WEAPON. HEPHAISTOS HAS DEEMED IT "BAD FOR BUSINESS."

EPILOGUE FAMILIA ◆ MYTH
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EPILOGUE

FAMILIA ◆ MYTH

It was just after Hestia's fiftieth failure to recruit someone into her *Familia*.

Her shoulders drooping, she happened to see the back of someone who looked lonely.

Judging from his build from behind, he was human. The thin, white-haired boy was wandering around the city with drooping shoulders, just like her.

Hestia was interested, so she decided to follow him for a while.

She hid in the shadows of buildings, careful not to make a sound so he wouldn't see her. *Tap tap tap.* She trailed him.

He was trying to get into a *Familia*, apparently. He was going from *Familia* home to home and getting turned away at the door every time. Hestia followed him to no fewer than ten different *Familias* before the tired boy took a seat on the road.

The lonely boy looked up, half watching the crowds of people pass by. He was looking for a place to call his own. If she left him like this, he might die of loneliness. Or so Hestia thought as she looked at his white visage.

"Hey! You there! The back roads are dangerous. You shouldn't use them, you know?"

The boy realized someone was talking to him.

He had stood up to go into a back road before hearing a stranger's voice. He turned around with surprise in his eyes to find Hestia.

"T-thanks… um… Who are you? Did you get lost back here all by yourself?"

"… The one who looks lost is you, don't you think?"

It was the worst meeting possible. This wasn't the first time; people always treated Hestia like a child when they first met her. However, as soon as the boy realized who she was, he furiously apologized over and over again.

"Ohh. So no matter what *Familia* you go to, they all refuse and show you the door?"

"Y-yes…"

Pretending that she didn't already know, Hestia stole a few looks at the boy.

While he didn't look too dependable, there was nothing wrong with his character. Actually, she kind of liked him.

From this short conversation, she could tell that for better or worse, he was a child.

"Well, you see, um… I'm looking for an adventurer to add to my *Familia* right now, actually. This is quite the coincidence, don't you think…?"

There was an almost painful hint of desperation in Hestia's voice. She had yet to successfully recruit even one adventurer.

"I'll join! Please, let me join!"

"… Are you sure that you are okay joining a *Familia* like mine?"

"Yes, of course! Are you sure that someone like me is welcome?"

Everything happened quickly after that. The two of them jubilantly introduced themselves, and *Hestia Familia* was born.

"All right, Bell. Follow me! We'll make your induction into my *Familia* official!"

"Yes, coming!"

She led him to a run-down bookstore.

An older human was behind the counter inside the store. He shook his short white beard when he saw Hestia come inside.

"Ah, Miss Hestia. If this is about your *Familia*, I still say no."

"It's not that! Can we use the upstairs room please, Mister?"

"Ah-ah. That's no problem. Just put the books back on the shelf when you finish reading them."

Hestia took Bell's hand and led him upstairs into a room that smelled like old wood.

The room was lined with shelves full of books from corner to corner. There were even books piled up on the floor in front of the shelves.

Hestia didn't have money to buy books herself, so she got on the good side of this store's owner and often came here to indulge in some literature.

"Okay, take off your clothes and sit here."

"My… clothes?"

"Ah, just your shirt is fine. I'm going to engrave my blessing into you now."

Hestia couldn't hide her giddiness as she set to work, engraving her Falna into his back.

She had decided a long time ago that she would give her first blessing to a child in this room.

Starting out from a place surrounded by what she loved was perfect.

What could be better than beginning a new story surrounded by many books?

"Bell, why did you want to become an adventurer?"

"Well, actually, ever since I was young I wanted to meet girls like the heroes in *Dungeon Oratoria*…"

“Meet girls…? You wanted to become an adventurer to do that…?”

“It’s not just that! Meeting girls is the pinnacle! It’s a man’s romance! My grandfather, who raised me, always said that ‘Harems are the best’!”

“I think your grandfather was mistaken…”

Hestia finished imprinting her Falna in no time at all.

Bell now had several black markings on his back. Hestia rubbed them with her hands.

It was like the first page of an ancient classic written in hieroglyphs.

This book was called a “status.”

So, let’s see what roads you have traveled…

Excelia… It showed everything a person had done and became a status. In other words, it was the history of a person who’d received a god’s blessing. The god judged everything seen or done by their entire family and wrote that onto their back.

Hestia was now in charge of continuing to write Bell’s story.

“…… All right now, Bell. Do your best! Our *Familia* starts now.”

“Ah, yes!”

Golden light shone in from the window, illuminating dust in the air of the room.

It was like all the countless books surrounding them were celebrating the birth of a new story.

Hestia smiled at all the blank pages yet to be filled in on Bell’s back.

His story will be written by her from this day forward.

It will be a story interwoven with other children’s.

A story repeated many times from the past, the adventurer.

The hero, protected by the gods.

The boy will walk this path, the goddess will record it.

Familia Myth.

Afterword

A person who was involved with this novel asked me, “If you had any skill (like the kind in this book), what would it be?” the other day.

This was actually a very embarrassing question. Even after putting some serious thought into it, I had no idea how to answer.

A skill is something that you excel at doing. So what am I exceptionally good at? It was then I realized that I had nothing that I could proudly declare, “I’m good at this,” to another person. I can list a number of weaknesses, but I couldn’t come up with a skill that I could puff out my chest and call my own.

I thought and thought. I briefly considered saying I could manipulate fire at will, but I knew I would regret it.

Then it hit me like a lightning bolt from the gods, *bing*!

The answer that came to me in that moment was “My skill is meeting people!” I said it proudly.

It makes me laugh with regret every time I think back on that person’s face and my excitement when I found my answer. Honestly, I would have liked to dig a hole and bury myself alive out of embarrassment. But I really do believe that I have a skill when it comes to meeting people.

I learned something by meeting so many people up to this point in my life. I received a lot of support and occasionally much-needed help. All of these “meetings” have given me many connections, and those connections are without a doubt my greatest treasure.

I have been blessed with many “meetings.”

This book could not have won a prize without the hard work of many people. First, I am grateful to all the members of the GA Editing Department, especially the leaders who put up with me and led me on the right path, and to Mr. Suzuhito Yasuda, for creating many illustrations for this novel. I also want to extend my gratitude to everyone I met during production. This publication was completed only because I met all these people and received their support. I would like to take a moment to express my appreciation. Thank you, everyone.

And finally to you, the one who was kind enough to read this novel.

This may sound strange, but I'd like to believe that I have "met" you through this book as well.

Thank you for reading my message. Let's "meet" again soon!

Sincerely,
Fujino Ohmori

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?, Volume 1
FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Andrew Gaippe

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DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA vol. 1

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